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A Journal of Modern Iraqi Arts



1 - 1986





# GILGAMESH

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*A Journal of Iraqi Arts*

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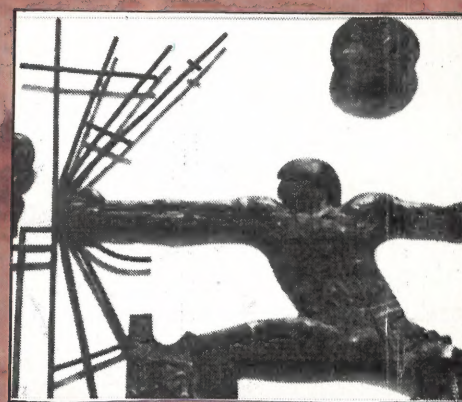
Editor-in-Chief: Naji al-Hadithi

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When it was announced that 1986 would be a year for culture in Iraq some people could not realize the implication of such an announcement. (P.14).

The theme of poetry and the city is a provoking one. It opens our ways for thorough discussion and suggests various ideas. This relation represents in its Iraqi and Arabic poetical achievement a sort of participation in and witness to a rising world and emerging cities. (P.48).



Iraqi artists have right from the start attempted to bring into existence a view of art which might be called Iraqi, or Arab. Their achievement in style is the child of a wedding of tradition to present-day contemporaneity. (P.92).

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Front cover: Jawad Salim. *Dressmaker*. Oil.

Inside back cover: Rafi' al-Nasiri. *Evocations for Baghdad*. Acrylic on canvas.

Back cover: Iraqi costume. Photo by Sami al-Nasrawi

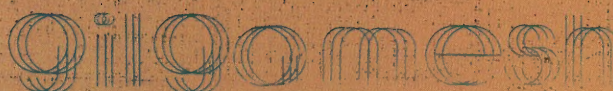
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A Journal of Iraqi Arts 1-1986

## Covering an Immortal Mission

■ By Naji al-Hadithi

By sending his hero in a long and hazardous journey in search of immortality, without, in the end realising his desire, the ancient Iraqi author of *Gilgamesh* (2000 B.C.), the oldest and most famous epic, probably wanted to say that the way to immortality is not only long and difficult, but also an open-ended one. Seeking immortality, the ancient Iraqi poet wanted to tell his compatriots, is an immortal mission and cannot be realised by seeking to escape death. Rather it can be achieved by enriching life. The Iraqis had already got the message. Two thousand years earlier, the Iraqi Sumerians invented writing and made several other achievements which laid some essential bases for man's civilisation. The Iraqis' eternal mission of enriching man's life and civilisation passed to the Babylonians, then to the Assyrians and to the Iraqi Muslims in the golden Abbasid era which had crowned that long process of generous giving to man's life.

However as *Gilgamesh* underwent in his strenuous search for immortality, his fellow countrymen, in their endeavour to enrich life, have experienced numerous problems ranging from objective difficulties facing any drive for modernisation and progress to pressure, invasion and conspiracy by foreign uncivilised groups. This is exactly what the Iraqis underwent especially at the hands of savage and barbaric groups in the east and north whose irritation by civilised and prosperous life in Mesopotamia often prompted them to invade it and extinguish the flame of learning and civilisation.

However, the desire of the Iraqis for a civilised life has been so vigorous and alive that they managed to rekindle this flame once and again.

After eight centuries of darkness under foreign domination, the Iraqis launched a new drive for modernisation albeit with great difficulty. In the first half of the twentieth century, basic steps were made along the path of progress. However not until a vigorous young national leadership breathed a new life in the Iraqis, did this drive go in full swing. It prompted them to find various ways and means to uproot backwardness, develop their country and make advances in all fields. Writers, artists, musicians, dramatists, poets, novelists, scholars and all creative people were encouraged with all that is necessary for unleashing their creative talents in reshaping life in this country. After centuries of living under tyranny and suppression and amid conditions of poverty and humiliation, those makers of culture were in need first and foremost of security, dignified life and a free hand to express themselves in whatever they deem fit for their experience. That is exactly what was provided for them in the last eighteen years. This enlightened attitude started to pay off recently with a flow of works of art in various fields. This process has further intensified during the last six years which brought the Iraqis face to face once again with the danger of invasion by Iran.

In facing up to this challenge, the Iraqis and especially those enlightened and cultured people were prompted to stick more and more to the process of enlightenment and cultural revival which was accelerated in the last eighteen years. They have, therefore, resumed *Gilgamesh's* pursuit of immortality by undertaking the immortal mission of this nation: to be a centre of civilisation, enlightenment and cultural revival in the whole region. Interaction between this process of revival and the foreign world is part of the mission of Dar al-Ma'mun for Translation and Publishing, the publishers of this magazine. *Gilgamesh* will therefore cover all aspects of modern Iraqi arts. Every issue will carry poetry, short stories, pictures, paintings, sculptures and ceramics, as well as literary and critical essays on literature and art.

Reviews of all related activities, in the fields of literature, art, publishing, drama and music will also be included.



# *So Far, an Eventful Year for Art in Iraq*

By Neween Abdul Majeed

The 1986 programme of exhibitions organized by the Art Department in Iraq and abroad continues to be diverse and productive.

Galleries in Baghdad held 45 painting, graphic arts, ceramics and sculpture exhibitions during the first half of the year. During Art Day celebrations on January 8, an exhibition of graphics by Rafa' al-Nasiri was opened at Al-Riwaq Gallery. In this exhibition, al-Nasiri showed a deeper interest in Islamic elements in art. His works range from mere depiction of the simple reality of Arab Islamic art to a high degree of abstraction.

A group exhibition of paintings, sculptures and ceramics was also held on the same occasion at the gallery of the Artists' Society. The exhibition



The Saddam Art Centre

reflected contemporary Iraqi art through works by such contemporary artists as Yahya al-Daraji, Nizar al-Hindawi, Sa'di al-Ka'bi, Salman Abbas and Mohammed Mahriddin, to mention only a few.

Three art exhibitions were held by the Art Department and the French Cultural Centre during January and February. The first of these exhibitions included lithographs by two French artists: Nathalie Chabrier and Roger Forissier. The second exhibition, entitled "Twentieth Century French Art", included 18 lithographs selected from the collection of Sorlier, a famous French artist who made lithographs of famous works by French artists including Matisse, Toulouse Lautrec and Raoul Dufy. The third of

these exhibitions included works by French and Iraqi artists with the theme "Between the Tigris and the Euphrates."

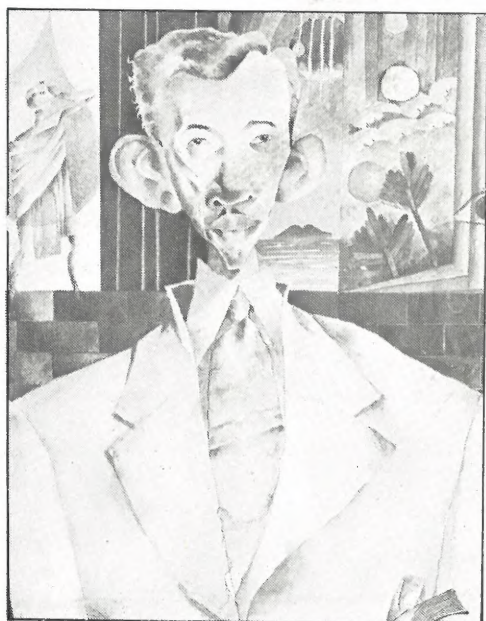
Iraqi sculptor Khalid al-Rahal held an exhibition which included a collection of murals at al-Orfali Gallery (February 5-27). Iraqi folklore, heritage and Baghdadi scenes were depicted in a number of works that looked more like paintings than sculptures. Al-Rahal employed a variety of styles and materials. Portraits were included in the exhibition.

More sculpture was seen at a viewing held by Abdul Rahim al-Wakil at al-Riwaq Gallery on February 15-25. The exhibits reflected the sculptor's long journey in art through vigorous bronze figurative works.

One of the most important exhibitions held during the first half of 1986 was the 13th Party Exhibition held on April 7. Iraqi artists contributed work depicting mainly war themes full of intellectual and emotional enthusiasm. There were works by Iraqi artists, including Hafidh al-Duroubi, Rafa' al-Nasiri, Yahya al-Daraji, Ali Talib, Sa'di al-Ka'bi and others.

To mark the birthday of President Saddam Hussein, the Saddam Art Centre was opened on April 28, with a group exhibition. The Centre, situated in Haifa Street, includes a permanent exhibition, a hall for projecting slides, a lecture hall, a library and a workshop.

Iraqi artists held and took part in exhibitions abroad, capturing two international awards. Three artists:



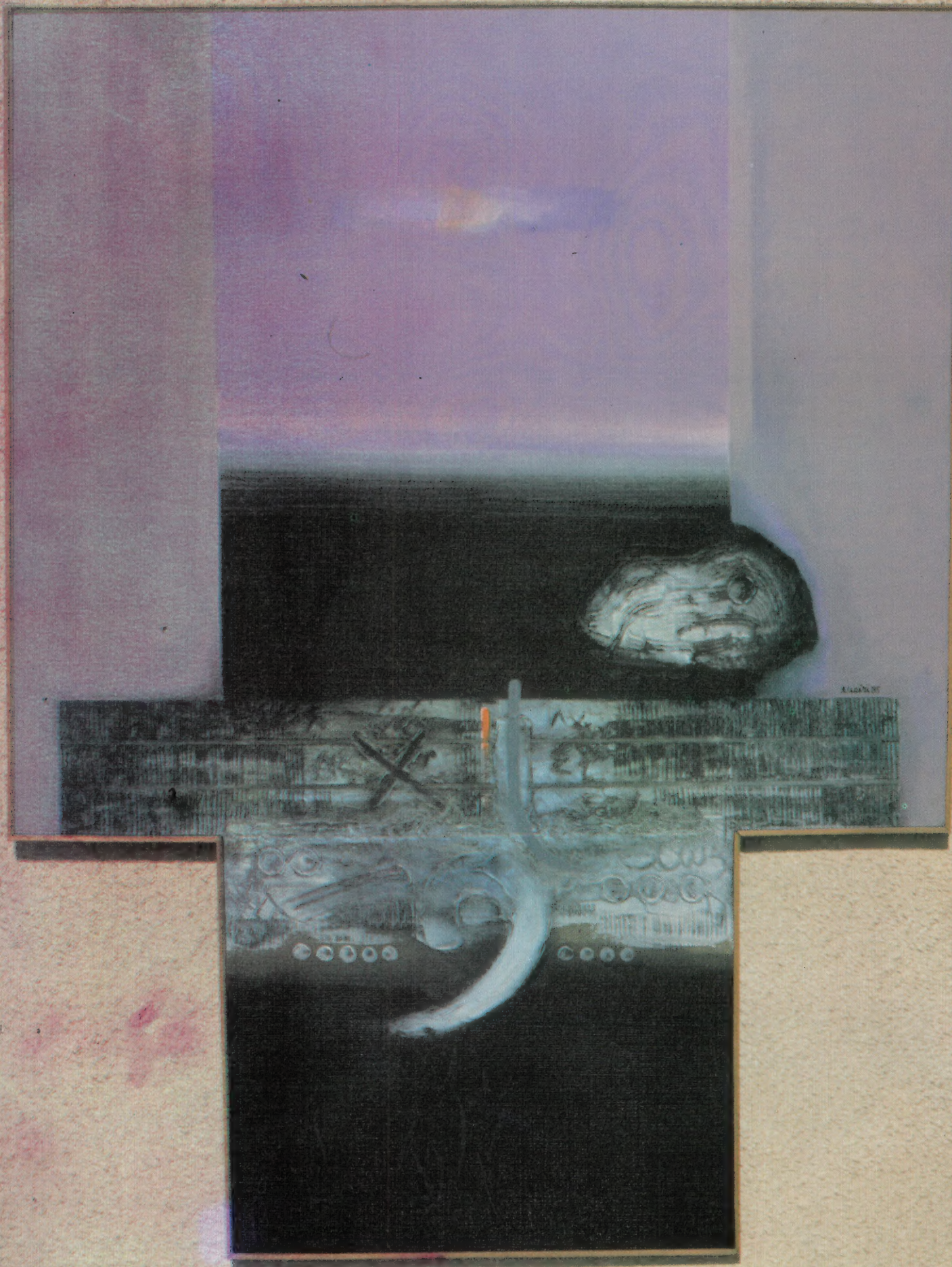
Poet Badr Shakir al-Sayyab by al-Mandalawi



Arabic calligraphy by Ayad al-Husseini



Currents....Currents....Currents....Currents....Currents....Currents....



Work by Rafa' al-Nasiri



# Currents....Currents....Currents....Currents....Currents....Currents....

Rafa' al-Nasiri, Khalid al-Rahal and Shakir Hassan Al Sa'id took part in the Triennale held in New Delhi on February 22. An exhibition by the Iraqi artist Ishtar Jamil Hammoudi was held at the Centre d'Accueil des Etudiants du Proche-Orient in Paris, France on March 12-April 9.

Sa'di al-Ka'bi captured the first prize at the month-long 3rd Asian Biennale, opened in Dhaka, Bangladesh on April 6. Al-Ka'bi's mixed-media work, *Desert 4X*, was selected from among 489 works from 16 countries.

Iraqi artist Hashim al-Tawil won a prize at the Euro-Asian art exhibition in Ankara, Turkey, on May 2. Mohammed Mahriddin and Ali Talib were also in the exhibition.

The National Museum of Modern Art, was the venue of two exhibitions held in May. The first was a retrospective one-man show by Suad Salim, elder brother of the late Iraqi artist Jawad Salim. Oil paintings and aquarelles by Saud Salim were shown in addition to Jawad Salim's famous *Dressmaker*, considered one of his masterpieces.

The second exhibition was held by geologist-artist Anwar Mustafa Barwari. The collection of oil paintings displayed centred on the theme of nature that revealed the artist's deep interest in the metaphysical concepts of art.



Mahin al-Sarraf with her paintings

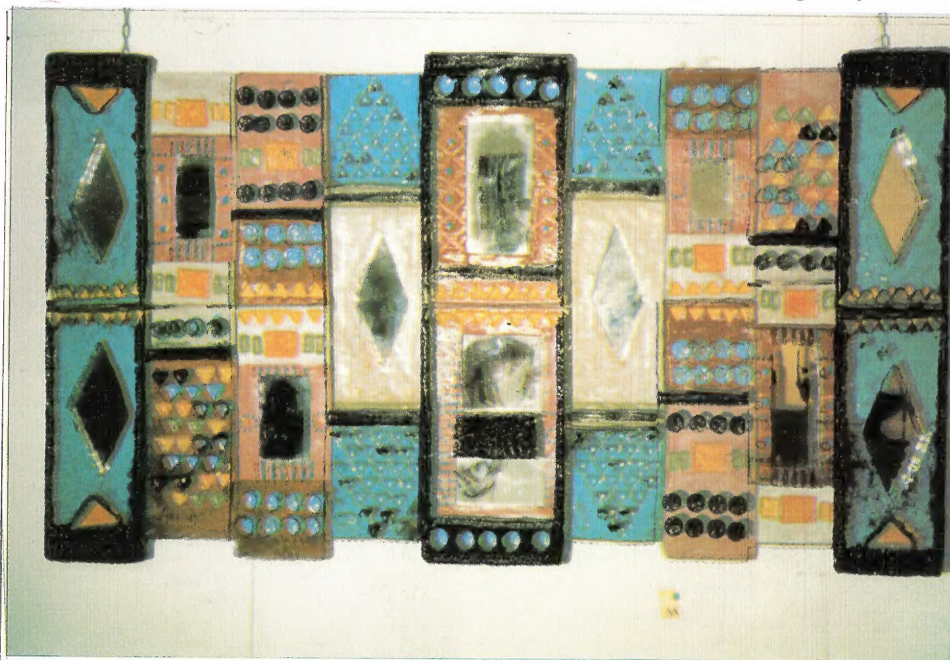
Quite a different style was used by Mehin al-Sarraf in her 13th one-woman show at al-Riwaq Gallery in May. The artist concentrated on the pleasant theme of nature, which she executed in dream-like shades of peach, pink and blue.

On May 21, al-Orfali Gallery had a ceramics exhibition by four Iraqi ceramists: Sa'd Shakir, Shiniar Abdulla, Nuha al-Radhi and Mohammed Uraibi. The four ceramists maintained, through a colourful collection of their work, the quality of the

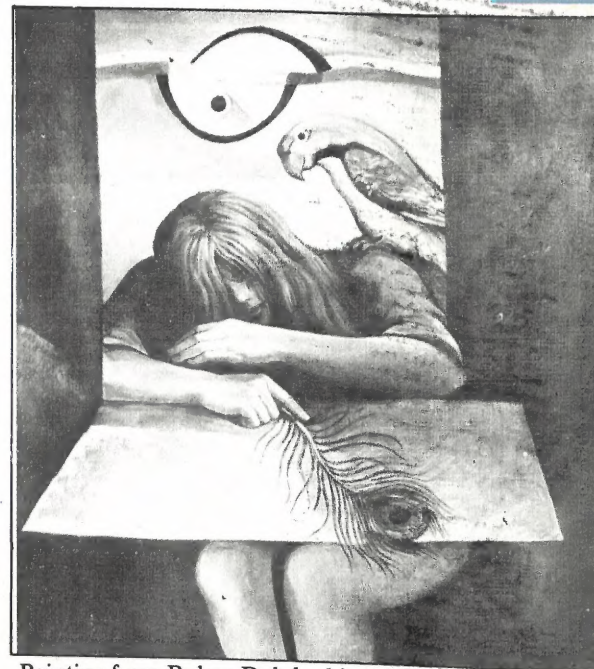
technique and the creative concept of the art of ceramics.

Shakir Hassan Al Sa'id held a one-man show of drawings on war and peace at Baghdad Gallery, also in May. The drawings displayed at the exhibition were a continuation of the artist's early work of the late 1950s. Like most of his other works the drawings displayed at that exhibition depicted ancient Arab and Islamic concepts, in a modern style.

Women were the main theme in Rakan Dabdoub's new exhibition at al-Riwaq Gallery on May 18-27. Most



Mural by Nuha al-Radhi



Painting from Rakan Dabdoub's exhibition





Sculpture by Ittihad Karim

of the works displayed at the artist's exhibition were a continuation of his style of abstract symbolism which he has adopted ever since the early 1960s.

The 20 works displayed reflected the artist's portrayal of the unknown, the secrets of women and the aesthetic aspect of life.

Also at al-Riwaq Gallery, a distinguished exhibition was held by Sa'di Abbas on May 28. It was the third for the artist, including a collection of works distinguished by colourful wavy stripes that revealed an awareness and sensitivity to the vital traditions of architecture and decoration and the pursuit of expressive and emotional meaning which surrounds the relations between figures and their environment.

An exhibition of calligraphy was opened at al-Orfaili Gallery on June 5 which aimed at illustrating the origins, rules and techniques of Arabic calligraphy and characters. It was also designed to be a tribute to the memory of the late Iraqi master of calligraphy, Hashim Mohammed al-Khattat.

To mark the Iraqi Press Day (June 15), an exhibition of cartoons was organized by the Iraqi Journalists Union at the National Museum of Modern Art.

Bahija al-Hakim displayed a collec-



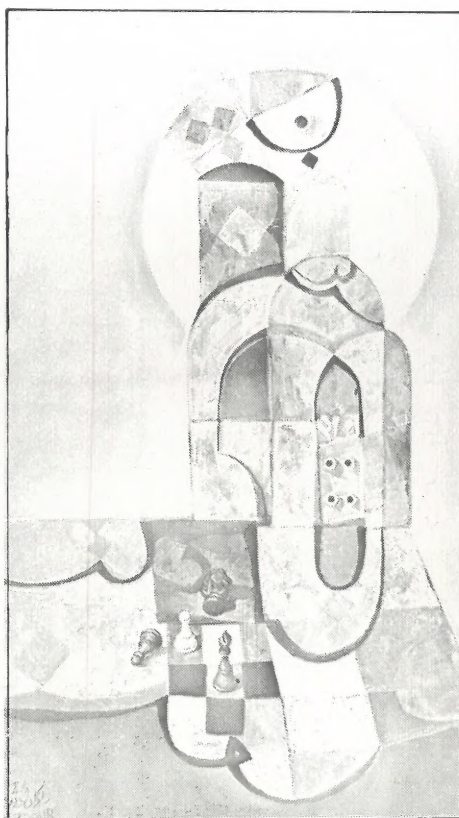
Painting by Ali Talib from the 13th Party Exhibition

tion of paintings with flowers at the main subject-matter (al-Riwaq Gallery, June 16-26). The artist's cheerful bright colours turned the exhibition into a carnival of flowers.

Art works from the Arab Republic of Yemen were exhibited at the National Museum of Modern Art dur-

ing the Yemeni Cultural Week in June.

Ayad al-Husseini displayed a number of calligraphic pieces which illustrated the possibility of introducing modern techniques while maintaining and adhering to the original rules of Arabic calligraphy.

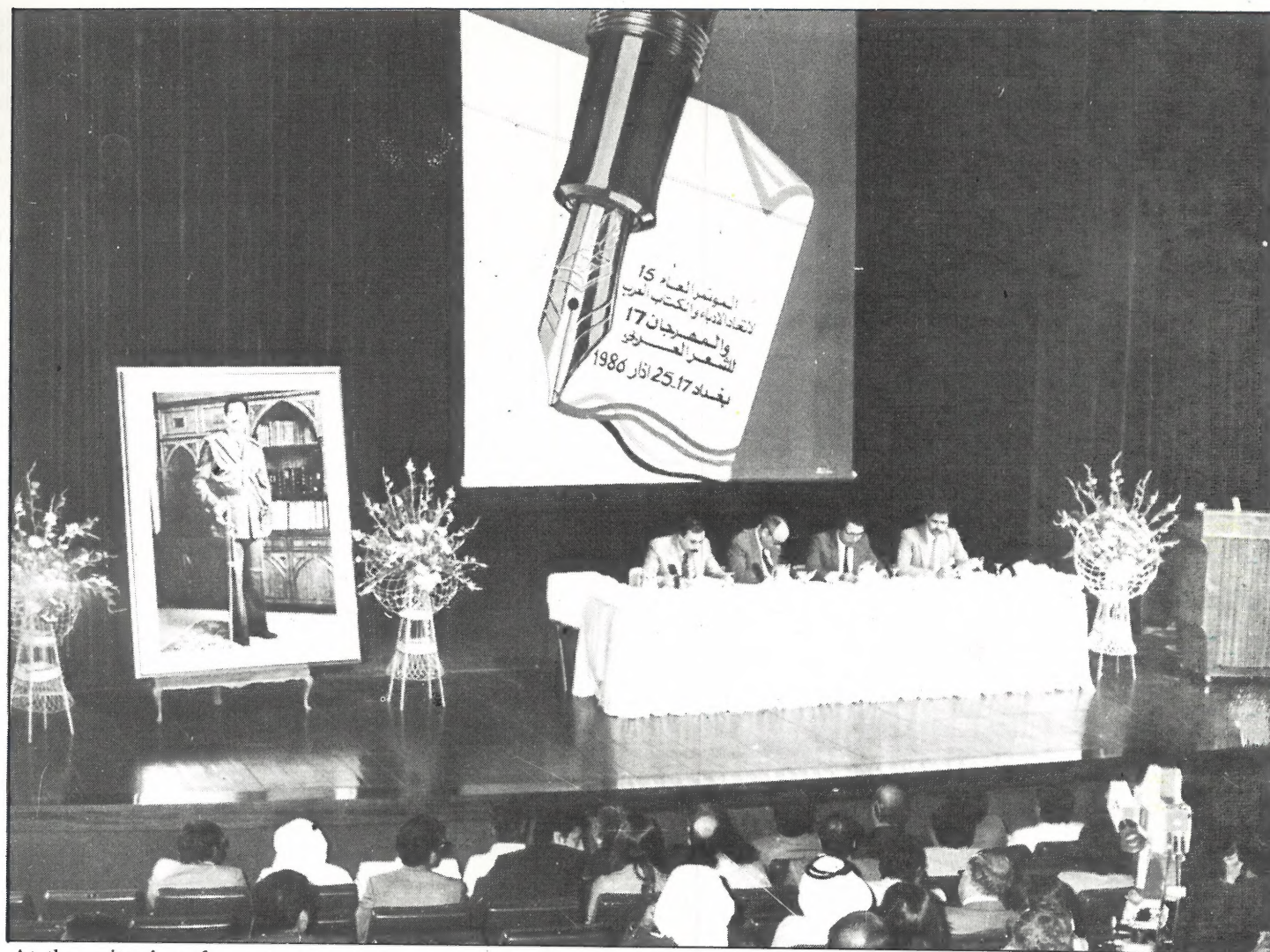


Chess by Dabdoub



Flowers of Bahija al-Hakim





At the writers' conference

## Arab Writers and Poets Meet in Baghdad

By Mohammed Darweesh

The 15th General Conference of the General Union of Arab Writers and the 17th Arabic Poetry Festival (Baghdad, March 17-25) have been Iraq's major literary activities this year.

Minister of Information and Culture, Mr Latif Nsayyif Jassim visiting the Baghdad National Theatre on March 17 opened the conference. On behalf of President Saddam Hussein, Mr Jassim welcomed hundreds of Arab and foreign writers, poets, scholars and critics who arrived in Baghdad to take part in the 9-day conference and festival. He assured those present that the land is being secured by Iraqi

fighters defending their country against invasion by Iran.

He said that Iraqi writers, poets, critics and scholars have been fighting the enemy through their writings. Moreover, almost all Iraqi writers and poets have taken an active part in the combat duties at the battlefronts, he said.

On behalf of the General Secretariat of the Union, Mr Mohammed al-Arousi al-Matwi (Tunisia) said that holding the conference at this time in Baghdad is a special occasion, not only for Iraq, but for all the Arab Nation.

Two other speeches followed, the first by Dr Fa'iq Mukhlis on behalf of

the Arab League Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, and the second by Mr Hamid Sa'id on behalf of the General Union of Iraqi Writers.

At the end of the opening session, the participants visited the Martyr Monument and the Monument of the Unknown Soldier.

The conference and the festival, both organised by the General Union of Arab Writers and the Iraqi Ministry of Information and Culture, was held under the theme "Challenge and Response in Contemporary Arab Culture". Some 50 Iraqi and Arab research papers were submitted during





A conference session

criticism sessions. Those papers dealt with literary criticism, Arabic language and cultural challenges.

The conference also formed three committees: one on freedom and the amendment of the Union's law, another on culture and information and a third on the final statement of the conference. The first committee finished a three-day meeting and discussed issues of writers in Palestine, Lebanon, the Arab Peninsula and Mauritania. The committee recommended November 29 as the Day of Solidarity with the writers of Palestine.

The second committee discussed for three days four main issues: the General Union's cultural plan in the next two years, the national prize of the union, the international prize of the union; and the state of the union's magazine *al-Katib al-Arabi* (The Arab Writer). The committee decided to hold in future a number of seminars on various literary topics such as "Literature and Culture in the Arab Gulf States", "Culture Confrontation in the Arab World", "Interaction Between Arab and World Contemporary Literature" and "Spirit of the Age in Contemporary Arabic Poetry."

Delegations to the conference and festival took the night train on Thursday evening, March 20, and travelled down to Basra (some 500 km south of Baghdad). At the Ma'qil railway station, they were received by Mayor of Basra, Mr Fawzi Rashid Abdulla, members of the Arab Ba'th Socialist Party and huge crowds of people who gathered at the station and lined the street of the city.

After a short tour of the city, the delegations laid a wreath at the statue of Badr Shakir al-Sayyab (1926-1964), the Iraqi poet who was born in Basra and then become pioneer of modern Arabic poetry. The poets and writers took their lunch with the Iraqi fighters who were coming from or heading to the battlefield.

On Friday evening, March 21, delegations visited various popular exhibitions held along the streets of Basra. They, then, visited the Martyrs' Museum and saw impressive exhibits.

In a statement issued at the end of its meetings and discussions, the conference condemned Iran for its aggression against Iraq. Participants also condemned Iran for its continuation of the war and called for the withdrawal of its forces to the international border.

The conference also called for immediate negotiations to end the Iraq-Iran conflict under the auspices of the UN. It condemned as well the parties that support Iran in its aggression against Iraq and called on other Arab countries for total commitment to the Joint Arab Defence Pact and the Arab League. The statement also stressed the participants' appreciation of Iraq and its attempts to put a peaceful end to the war. It again called on mediation parties to accelerate efforts to end the war.

At the end of the conference, participants sent a telegram to President Saddam Hussein, in which they expressed their appreciation of his role and efforts in holding the conference in Baghdad.

## Dramatists in Wartime Help Keep Up Public Morale

By Sausen Faisal El-Samir

Despite the current Iraq-Iran war, now in its sixth year, Iraqi dramatists have never ceased to give the public the benefit of their work. This proves that the people of Iraq are determined to carry on a normal, peaceful and productive life, convinced that one day life will return to normal.

A look at drama performances in Iraq during the first half of 1986 proves the dramatists' vim and high productivity. The two major events were the celebration of the World Theatre Day (March 27) and the 3rd Festival of the Experimental Theatre (March 10-20).

During the celebration of the World Theatre Day, awards and certificates of merit were distributed to Iraqi dramatists of the year. A certificate of merit was awarded to the late Ahmed Abdul Amir Ja'far, member of the National Theatre Company, who met



Nas wa Nas



martyrdom in Fao. Other certificates of merit went to the best stage directors and actors of the year. The stage directors are Qassim Mohammed for *Risalat al-Tayr* (The Bird's Message), Salah al-Qassab for Shakespeare's *King Lear*, Shafiq al-Mehdi for *Lu'bat al-Hulm* (The Dream Play), Sabah Atwan for *al-Mahatta* (The Station) and Sa'doun al-Ubaidi for *Al-Bidaya* (The Beginning).

The certificates of merit allocated to the best actors were awarded to Shatha Salim for *Risalat al-Tayr* (The Bird's Message), Awatif Salman for *Nas wa Nas* (Different People), Khalid Ali for *Lu'bat al-Hulm* (The Dream Play) and to Mohammed Saqar for *Sayra wa Dayra* (It Happened).

There were 14 awards, including a Best Actor Award which went to Mahmoud Abu al-Abbas for his role in *al-Malik wa al-Mamlouk* (The Owner and the Owned) and a Best Actress one, awarded to Athmar Khudhur for her role in *al-Insan al-Tayyib*, an adaptation of Bertolt Brecht's *The Good Woman of Setzuan*.

At the 3rd Festival of the Experimental Theatre there were 14 awards. The first award went to al-Yaum Theatre Company for *Sur al-Sin* (The Great Wall of China) and the second to the Young Dramatists Club in Babylon for *Ihmis fi Uthni al-Salima* (Whisper in My Sound Ear).

"The 1986 drama programme is as rich as that of 1985, which included many successes and involved some 120 stage actors in constant rehearsals,"



*Sorry, Wrong Number*



*Al-Shuraka'*

said Qassim al-Mallak, actor and stage-manager at the State Establishment for Cinema and Theatre.

He added that during the first half of 1986, Iraqi theatre companies have planned to perform 15 plays in Baghdad alone. The National Theatre Company has performed *Risalat al-Tayr* (The Bird's Message), directed by Qassim Mohammed as a contribution to Art Day (January 8) at the National Theatre. At the same theatre, the Company performed, early this year, *Maqamat Abi al-Ward* (Maqamat of Abi al-Ward), written by Adil Kadhim and directed by Ibrahim Jalal. Performances were *al-Shuraka'* (The Partners), adapted and directed by Wajdi al-Ani, *Hal al-Dunya* (Life's Ups and Downs) of Muqdad Muslim as well as *al-Shari'a* (The Jetty), written by Yousif al-Ani and directed by Qassim Mohammed.

The Company's performances during the first half of 1986 at al-Rashid Theatre included *Misbah Aladdin* (Aladdin's Lamp), a children's play translated and directed by Salim al-Jaza'iri. Two foreign plays have also been adapted. The first is *Sorry, Wrong Number* by Lucille Fletcher, the American playwright, starring Salima Khudhayir. The play, adapted by Dr Nabil Rashid and directed by Fakhri al-Aqidi, was performed in June. The second is Agatha Christie's *The Mousetrap*, translated and adapted by Mohammed Judi and directed by Muhsin al-Azzawi, currently being rehearsed.

*Sorry, Wrong Number*, is a one-actor thriller, which highlights the agonies of Mrs Stevenson (Salima Khudhayir), the old crippled widow who suffers from neurosis and hallucinations.

Meanwhile, the Modern Theatre Company has planned to stage five performances. These include *al-Th'ib* (The Wolf), adapted by Abdul Amir Shamkhi and directed by Sami Abdul Hamid, *Khait al-Brisam* (Silk Thread), written by Yousif al-Ani and directed by Dr Fadhil Khalil, both performed earlier this year. It will re-perform *Nufus* (Mentalities), adapted and directed by Qassim Mohammed. This play proved box-office success last year.

In the meantime, al-Yaum Theatre Company early this year performed *Sirakh al-Samt al-Akhras* (Silent Outcry), written by Muhieddin Zangana and directed by Awni Karoumi as well as Brecht's *Wedding of the Petit Bourgeois*, adapted by Tareq Hayder and directed by Adil Georgis.

Moreover, during the 15th Arab Writers Conference in Baghdad, March 17-23, *al-Bab* (The Door) was performed. The play, written by the contemporary Iraqi poet Yousif al-Sayigh and directed by Qassim Mohammed was performed at al-Mansour Theatre. The play is about a man who refuses to fulfil the pledge "If Death Do Us Part," which here implies that he will be buried with his late wife. The court insists on the fulfil-



ment of the pledge, yet he refuses. The public prosecutor tries to convince the widower to agree to the sentence, promising to unearth him two days later. The widower, who has no alternative, walks to his grave. The playwright and the stage director have successfully created a highly impressive work.

The decor was symbolic, and the lighting effective. Dr Aqeel Mahdi, though only given a short role, was powerful in performance; Ahlam Arab, a new actress, was competent, Mahmoud Abu al-Abbas, the leading character, so competent that he has been nicknamed by dramatists and critics "the multiple actor." Earlier this year he won the public's appreciation for his performance in *al-Malik wa al-Mamlouk* (The Owner and the Owned).

*Risalat al-Tayr* (The Bird's Message) is inspired by a work of Avicenna who is known for his metaphysical logic, the gist of which is "God is pure logic and reason, always aware of his substance, and thus knows absolutely everything." The play, directed by Qassim Mohammed, wafts the audience to a metaphysical atmosphere, dealing with the nature of existence, truth and knowledge. The actors are birds of various kinds, involved in a fierce struggle. Some of the birds give in, others revolt, and some win the fight. The hoopoe is the wise bird, which embarks upon the search for a sincere saviour. This play is built dramatically around the role of the narrator. The director, actors and lighting engineer achieved great success.

Many plays were performed in the provinces and still others were performed by the Academy and the Institute of Fine Arts. The performances of the Academy early this year included Akatagawa's *Rashomon*, which was performed by the students of the Theatre Department. The play is based on a story of the same title by the famous Japanese writer.

The Theatre Department also staged *Ahzan Muharrij al-Sirk* (Agonies of the Clown), written by Dr Salah al-Qasab, as well as *Cleopatra*. The latter, directed by Sami Abdul Hamid, was the adaptation of Shakespeare's, Dryden's, Bernard Shaw's and Ahmed Shawqi's works. It deals with the character of Cleopatra,



*The Three Sisters*



*Al-Mahatta*



*Misbah Aladdin*



the Egyptian queen, through the points of view of the four writers who presented her in the way each one saw fit.

The Theatre Department at Institute of Fine Arts has performed seven plays during this academic year, five of which were Arabic adaptations. The adaptations included Shakespeare's *Richard II*, Chekhov's *The Three Sisters*, Pepino de Felipo's *The Unwanted Guest*, as well as T.S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* and Jean Anouilh's *Becket ou L'honneur de Dieu*, both interblended in a single adaptation. The Arabic dramas performed at the Institute were *Mahrajan al-Duma fi Souq al-Haraj* (Puppet Show in Suq al-Haraj) and *Wada'an Ayuha al-Shu'ara'* (Farewell to Poets), written by Abdul Jalil al-Qaysi.

The adaptation of Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* and Anouilh's *Becket ou L'honneur de Dieu* was worked out and directed by Hunain al-Mani', an

undergraduate, as part of his graduation thesis. The play simply tells the story of King Henry II and his friend Thomas Becket, who later became the Archbishop of Canterbury. It focuses on the dispute between the two friends.

Felipo's *The Unwanted Guest*, is a contemporary Italian drama, translated into Arabic by Abdulla Jawad and directed by Imad al-Safi.

The play deals with superstitious people. The central theme is the effect of mysterious powers on the course of events in some people's lives.

*The Unwanted Guest*, and *The Three Sisters* were performed in the new theatre hall at the Institute.

*Mahrajan al-Duma fi Souq al-Haraj* (Puppet Show in Suq al-Haraj) was prepared and directed by Qassim Matroud, an undergraduate of the Theatre Department at the Institute. Matroud derived his theme from a number of dramas. However, he mainly adapted two plays to produce a blend of Brecht's *Galileo Galilei* and Salah

Abdul Sabour's *Ma'sat al-Hallaj* (The Tragedy of al-Hallaj).

The play highlights the intellectuals' sacrifices in their search for, and defence of "truth". The script was in two separate parts. The first part is about Galileo, the optimist astronomer while the second al-Hallaj, the sad mystic.

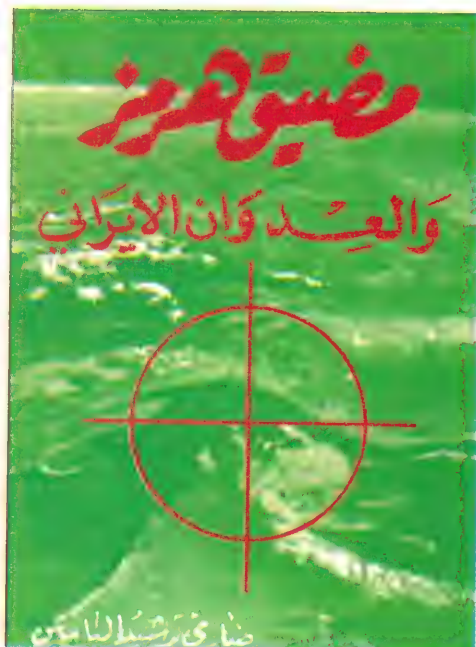
Finally, it is only fair to point out that the contemporary Iraqi dramatists have generously contributed to the war theatre. They have staged many dramas dealing with the heroism of the Iraqi armed forces in frustrating the Iranian aggressors. One such staging this year was *Hikayat Min al-Khandaq al-Khalfi* (Stories from the Rear Trench), written and directed by Hani Hani. The nature of this war drama naturally makes the performance more electrifying, because it highlights actual incidents which have taken place at the battlefield. The style of the play, therefore, was purely realistic, and much enriched by the use of Iraqi folk songs and popular proverbs.



Maqamat Abi al-Ward



## Publishing Flourishes in Iraq



■ By Mohammed Darweesh

Towards the end of 1985, Minister of Information and Culture, Mr. Latif Nsayyif Jassim announced that the year 1986 should be a year for culture in Iraq.

Theoretically, some people could not realize the implication of such an announcement. However, those working with culture and publishing knew well how the entire face of writing, publishing and printing would take a different shape.

Practically, two major publishing houses have become aware of the fact that the Minister's announcement would secure and boost their activities in the business. Dar al-Ma'mun for Translation and Publishing and the Cultural Affairs House, both of the Ministry of Information and Culture, have been working hard, especially since the beginning of 1986, in order to provide their readers with a great variety of books, magazines, journals and other publications that are of vital importance to almost every reader.

Dar al-Ma'mun has, since its foundation in 1980, produced hundreds of titles in twelve foreign languages. These titles mainly cover President

Saddam Hussein's speeches, addresses and writings. So far, Dar al-Ma'mun has published 64 titles in English, 54 in French, 41 in German, 37 in Portuguese, 43 in Spanish, 35 in Turkish, 27 in Serbo-Croatian, 26 in Russian, 27 in Farsi, 10 in Italian, three in Swedish and two in Greek.

Translating and publishing these works in foreign languages reflect, in fact, the need of the interested readers who speak these languages for the President's works. Obviously, interest in President Hussein's various speeches and works springs from the fact that they don't deal with mere political theorization. A look at many of these titles and an examination of the content itself show that President Saddam Hussein has also taken into consideration various issues related to social and economic aspects of Iraqi and Arab life; education and development.

Dar al-Ma'mun has also published fine translations of a number of other Iraqi writings especially in politics, short stories, novels and poetry. Since its establishment, the Dar has been working enthusiastically to develop

and extend the activities of its staff. Many of the staff were sent to England, France and Germany to develop their skills in translation into foreign languages. Even training courses were held here in Baghdad, for the same purpose, with foreign experienced people giving lectures.

In yet another ambitious project, Dar al-Ma'mun has recently started to publish translations from world literature into Arabic. The translations which have already come out include Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and *The Tempest*, translated by Jabra I. Jabra, George Macbeth's *A War Quartet*, translated by Yassin T. Hafidh, Colin Wilson's *The Craft of the Novel*, translated by Mohammed Darweesh and Gavriil Troyepolsky's well-known novel *The White Gordon With One Black Ear*, translated by Abdul Wahid Mohammed. Many other literary works are in print while others are being translated at present.

Dar al-Ma'mun also publishes the English language daily *The Baghdad Observer*, the French language fortnightly magazine *Bagdad* and the



### Farsi monthly paper *Haqiqat* (Truth).

A quarterly cultural magazine, *Gilgamesh*, is yet another and most recent publication of the Dar.

The Cultural Affairs House is the Iraqi major publishing house in Arabic. A large number of books and magazines come out every month, offering a cross section of readers almost everything they want to know about.

During this year, the House is expected to publish and reprint four hundred titles dealing with different subjects: science, general studies, historical and cultural studies, literary studies, studies in the art of story and novel, stories, novels, plays, poetry, information, folklore, ancient history, dictionaries and arts. Until the end of June, the House issued around 200 titles.

Recently it has signed contracts with two major Arab publishing houses: the Egyptian al-Haya' al-Misriyya al-Amma lil Kitab and the Moroccan Dar Topqal lil Nashr. These contracts would provide Arab readers with books in a much easier way than before and help the Iraqi book cross the boundaries to other Arab countries.

The Arab cultural and literary magazines published by the House in-

clude *Afaq Arabiyya*, a monthly cultural magazine, *al-Aqlam*, a monthly literary magazine, *al-Tali'a al-Adabiyya*, a literary monthly for the youth, *al-Turath al-Sha'bi*, a quarterly magazine of folk arts, *al-Mawrid*, a quarterly magazine of Arab heritage, *ath-Thakafa al-Ajnabiyya*, a quarterly magazine of translation of world literature and *Funoun*, a fortnightly magazine of cinema, drama, theatre and arts.

Other publishers include the Universities of Baghdad, Mosul, Basra and al-Mustansiriyah. Their publications, although mainly academic, have recently covered subjects not necessarily related to the academic fields.

The University of Mosul Printing Press has for the past six months been very busy publishing books for the private sector, mainly represented by a few bookshops in Mosul, Baghdad and other cities.

Besides these activities, a number of other publishers started to develop the scope of their business, publishing books on almost every field.

Dar al-Qadissiya, began as a printing press in 1977 and turned into a publishing house in 1983, has so far published 107 titles mainly on law. It also publishes books for children and women. Its publisher, Mr Sabah Sadiq is happy to have taken part in all

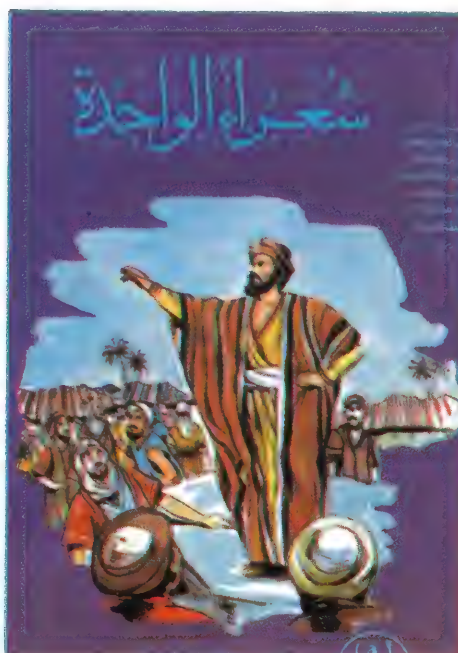
annual book fairs in Baghdad.

Dar al-Tarbiya is another major publishing house in Baghdad. Founded in 1965, its publisher, Mr Abdul Hassan al-Radhi said that so far over a hundred titles came out. They include stories translated from world literature, language books, Islamic heritage, medical books, cultural books and children books. Mr al-Radhi explained that Dar al-Tarbiya has now many books in print, especially on heritage. He also said that the Dar is intended to publish specialised encyclopedia on various subjects which would be of great value to the reader.

Already, an Arabic medical encyclopedia has been published.

Al-Naq'a' Bookshop started in 1970 as a simple and modest bookshop in al-Mutanabbi Street in Baghdad. In 1975 it entered the field of publishing with a few books. At present, its business boomed with many books coming out every month. The Publisher, Mr Sa'd Abdul Shahid, is keen on providing his readers with serious books. That would perhaps explain the quality books he has so far published.

Books on literature, religion, science and technology are the chief interest of al-Naq'a' Bookshop.





# The White Bird

■ By Hamid Sa'id

Hundreds of birds darting hither and thither  
A storm of dusty bills, florid eyes and mud balls  
Some tawny coloured  
And many pitch black  
Scores of them, from dawn to dusk  
Fill the air with happy surprise  
In their clamour and mirth alike.



On green rooftops, as fresh as may,  
Amidst birds the cotton-white one in spied.  
Up it flies when the child draws nigh  
And birds remain just like before  
Some tawny coloured  
And many pitch black  
Days extend to years  
As the child vainly waits  
Till he grows out of teens,  
But still he sees not  
The cotton-white one.

\* \* \* \*

Birds by hundreds keep  
In the white one's tail  
But he who swallows thier dust,  
Fails to make it out.

\* \* \* \*

Trees are snow-white,  
A horizon steely cold,  
Everything frost-clad,  
But guns are warm to one's touch.  
Winds intimate as a song  
Mountain paths ravishing as love birds.  
Passionate longing runs warm in his veins  
As he remembers that tomorrow his leave is.  
He nods a little, then wakes up,  
Nods a little, then wakes up  
For tomorrow his leave is.

\* \* \* \*

His leave is his heart's desire  
The sun is a cotton field, or a river of gold,  
And the birds clamour.  
Some tawny coloured  
And many pitch black.  
In, the cotton-white bird flies  
Down it drops then shoots up again  
Now he is home  
In childhood meadows.  
And the sun is up  
High in the sky.

Translated by Karam H. Helmy





# About the Gun

■ By Yassin Taha Hafidh

Curiously  
I contemplate this strange-looking one  
That keeps us company  
I draw nearer to it  
See how it is faring  
Feel its cold solidity.  
This strange thing  
Stands dumbly in our midst,  
Awaiting the moment when  
Everything is decided;  
When it reveals its hidden wisdom  
To me, and  
To those, over there, on the other side.  
Standing as it does by itself,  
It looks out of this universe  
Awfully quiet  
strangely sedate  
Vague in its might.  
When it hurls the fire ball  
It thinks it's a shiver,  
Knowing not  
Who he is that has, through it,  
Hurled death,  
Or died.

Translated by Karam H. Helmy



# Abdul Ilah

■ By Sami Mehdi

*At the heated hour of fight  
"Go ahead"  
Fire then enveloped the green meadow,  
Smoke shrouded men and the dark,  
The earth shook with terror  
There and everywhere,  
Nothing in sight but death.  
Seeing you not  
I gave you the cry:  
"Abdul Ilah, where are you?"  
Amidst the din nothing came back  
But mine own echo:  
"Where are you?"  
It sounded faint and remote,  
As old as time.  
To vanish in the sand,  
The dark and smoke.  
And you.  
Where you still  
Alive?  
Where?  
In another fold of the hills?  
Among another group of men?  
Where were you?*

\* \* \* \*

*You'd been with me,  
Right beside me.  
In the lilies reddened  
I saw your blood,  
In the mangled bodies  
I smelt your presence,  
So,  
Where were you?*

\* \* \* \*

*Killing was a mutual affair  
We killed and were killed,*

*Thus ended another round with the enemy:  
Those who came back  
Have honoured the hero of heroes.  
Yet you are still over there,  
On the hills,  
Smeared in blood,  
Braving death.*

Translated by Karam H. Helmy





# Elegy

■ By Sami Mehdi

*I remember that once we had names,  
Knew our kith and kin,  
Were familiar with every house,  
Every corner,  
Every tale recounted  
About the dead and the living.  
The cycle of things was  
Slower.  
This maddening world  
So was the universe,  
So was everything that was.  
Everything just was  
Now, here I am,  
After time has turned full circle,  
After the devil's finger has smitten the city,  
Bartering my quiet away  
Hiring my skin out  
Asking whoever approaches  
Is this all I have?  
Is this all that remains?  
Where is gone the vigour of youth?  
Where is love?  
Where is the dream?  
Where have long-nourished illusions gone?  
Where is man's inborn instinct?  
Everything has changed,  
And my time is over.  
Of my legacy nothing is left  
Except descent.  
My home is no longer mine.  
My neighbour is no longer the same.  
My address has changed,  
In its place is a blank.  
Alone I returned  
Alone I trod the earth  
And alone I died.*

Translated by Karam H. Helmy





# Leaves

■ By Yassin Taha Haidh

*Dry leaves  
Dry leaves  
Look wherever I might,  
It's layers upon layers of dry leaves  
The Mesquite forest had dropped  
A dry age  
A dry distress  
A dry solace  
And here I am  
Taking steps that are  
Jugs dropping from high,  
Shattered glass clattering  
Under my steps  
When was it  
That all these leaves  
Left their green stalks?  
Turned dry and brittle  
Leaving no memories behind  
Or hope?  
Nothing but leaves is left  
All dry  
All dry*

*As I moved off, my hands kept feeling for my own  
self.  
Ah  
The leaves haven't dried up.*

Translated by Karam H. Helmy





# The Great Mulberry

■ By Hamid Sa'id

*The King of the orchard  
Is so vain of its lofty trunk  
And mighty crown of branches  
But when it's summer  
All trees fruit,  
Except for the great mulberry,  
Which dejectedly departs:  
The trunk to the carpenter's  
And branches to the bonfire*

\* \* \* \*

*Togehther they had grown up.  
Abdullah still remembers its green leaves,  
The dark shadow in the water,  
And a woman and kiddies at midday  
Enjoying its protective shade.  
Fast it had grown  
Faster than Abdullah,  
And birds quickened in its shelter.*

\* \* \* \*

*One day he rose from his infant days  
To see morning birds  
Dot with colour moist trees.  
The great one, however,*

*Was nowhere to be seen.*

\* \* \* \*

*The king of the orchard  
Has abdicated the throne of shade,  
To establish for oblivion a realm.  
The realm of oblivion, though,  
Has a language cold  
Seeking warmth in sad memories*

\* \* \* \*

*Oh! Abdullah's mother,  
Where is my other twin gone?  
The one you saw off at the spring?  
Abdullah's mother says nothing.  
Again he asks,  
She still keeps silent.*

\* \* \* \*

*When he picks up his morning bread,  
And feels the smell of smoke,  
Out he goes  
To plant another sapling  
On the bank of time ever running.*

Translated by Karam H. Helmy

## Concessions

■ By Sami Mehdi

*Long ago  
I once gave up a dream;  
A woman I had loved.  
Then, bit by bit  
I forsook all I possessed.  
Everything.  
Nothing remained that could be mine  
But my poetry.  
And here I am  
Dispossessing myself of it.  
For others' sake.*

Translated by Karam H. Helmy





# A Face in Arbil's Market

■ By Yassin Taha Hafidh

*A man to me said:  
And I turned to  
That face, had I recalled:  
I must have come across  
And seen in a dream, or somewhere  
Or is it a mere fancy?  
Here comes that reassuring angel  
With a bit of sadness  
With a flicker of light from far-off days  
charting her noble steps in a wrold  
Deserted by myths.  
And passing on roads never touched by magic,  
Forsaken by roses or ever.  
Would I recollect  
Would I remember  
Perhaps she is referred to in the holy Bible  
Perhaps I saw a portrait  
Or have a fancy of her prototype.  
She came closer  
Slowly  
And in utter quietness she wanders  
Searching for a necessity in the market  
She does look for the secret  
She lost long ago in this city.  
All are spell-bound  
And a shiver passes  
They stood motionless  
To avoid  
Confusion of  
In front of this mysterious beauty  
Who enters the market at noon*

*Now and then,  
All are governed by fear  
And deep awe  
by something akin to love they don't grasp  
Eyes are afraid of her secret  
All cast their looks down  
When she is far away  
Their faces left them  
In pursuit of her  
And behind her their faces surface in silence.*

Translated by Shihab Ahmed

## Engagements

■ By Sami Michel

*Of love we shadows been spread  
On the day  
That when taken away,  
And were by fire consumed,  
Our flames resurfaced us,  
And we parted  
We were  
As others often are  
In a lamp*





By Lutfiyya al-Dilaimi

# He Who Came

Short Story

This story is only a love story. It is not a legend or a folk-tale. And when I narrate it to you, I don't expect you to believe it. Suffice it to say that I lived it and I have material evidence to convince myself and others that it is true. The story, after all, concerns nobody except me — at least at the personal level, so it is, my story alone and I am its heroine and living witness.

Every time I entered a museum, this strange thing happened to me: my head whirled. I was annoyed, and had difficulty in breathing, followed by numbness running from the back of my head down to my back and limbs. Yes, that used to happen to me, then my hands would start trembling, my pulse would race, and I would be overwhelmed by a wave of heat that suffused my whole body. I am not a woman of deep imagination or a writer who invents strange tales. I am a history teacher, fond of the ancient civilization of Iraq, interestd in things beyond the human soul and nature, and fascinated by extraordinary things.

In the beginning, I tried to ignore my symptoms; I used to resist them and overcome them, to some extent. I ascribed them to some disorder in my health and said:

"Perhaps, I am exhausted or they are symptoms of a drop in my blood pressure, or lack of magnesium, or may be - like most lovers - I am suffering from sleeplessness".

But the recurrence of my symptoms at different times proved to me that there was some secret cause I could not fathom. That secret was connected with those ancient worlds, their thousand ages squeezed in the chambers of the great museum.

Three days ago, the same thing happened to me during a visit to the museum with my schoolgirls after an interruption of three years and several months. The girls swept me along the corridors and chambers.

I was hesitating to enter but I held myself together and went in. No more than a moment and I started to feel dizzy. My head whirled I began to **stagger**, my pulse increased, I had difficulty in breathing. I stopped in the cold corridor and extended my hand to lean on the nearest thing. I rested my head and back against a smooth surface. A little later, I felt some rest and was refreshed by the coolness of the smooth marble on which I put my burning cheek. My eyes were closed and perhaps I sighed when I felt the smooth marble being warmed by the heat of my face.

When I looked at it, it was like a satin dress worn by an unknown mother to whom I go for comfort from my sufferings.

I moved leaving the corridor and entered the Sumerian hall. The girls were standing before the head of the Sumerian Queen **Pu-abi**, their eyes gleaming with astonishment. They were surrounded by waves of the warmth of youth and the smell of emotion. In the light, their faces appeared to me like small moons glowing with admiration before the beauty of the Queen of Ur with her jewellery made of gold, lapis lazuli and enamel. They were gazing at the three flowers above her head, surrounded by three rows of gold peach-leaves, with gold rings and **triangles** dangling on her wheat-brown forehead.

I had a feeling of longing for that face which revealed an ancient sorrow; the face which looked at me with a kind of conquettish **annoyance** in spite of the dignity shown in the dignified features worthy of its Sumerian beauty.

For years I have avoided visiting the museum — for the dizziness and **numbness** that fell upon me like a curse whenever I saw skeletons or the utensils covered with green





copper oxide and the statues which seemed to be asking for help from the captivity of stone.

Once again, the girls were fascinated by the wonderful necklaces which the dignified priestesses of Ur wore— these were gifts from the king for his favourite worshippers, strung with beads of gold, silver, lapis lazuli and carnelian.

They were overwhelmed by the sheer craftsmanship, without thinking of the invisible ingredients in that beauty: love, hate, magic, conspiracies, suffering, and prophecy.

One of the girls approached me and asked:

"Miss Nihal. You are pale, you must be tired. Do you need any help?"

"I am all right. Don't worry ...Go and enjoy your visit."

The girl looked at me and her cheeks glowed. Her voice quivered with passion as she whispered my name once again:

"Miss Nih...al".

"Go, Semiramis. Don't stand before me like that; go or you will hear some unpleasant remarks from the other girls."

"Shall I get you something to drink or do you need some medicine?"

"When I need something, I'll ask nobody but you."

The girl's lips trembled and she extended her hand to touch my shoulder quickly, then she pulled it back in fear.

The girl always hovered round me and the school atmosphere sometimes became filled with the smell of women. She was like a lost dove. She cooed with strange, soft words. They were words which disturbed my loneliness and sorrow, which I resisted. She used to care for me as if she was my mother. I, myself, was old enough to be a mother to her. Then she used to snatch some little thing to keep as a souvenir: an embroidered handkerchief, a pen, a hair-pin, etc. They were sacred amulets and talismen for her. Then, soon, she would give me, as girls usually do, sweet delicate presents: heart-shaped sweets with the initial letters of both my name and hers written on them, or a small bunch of flowers tied up with a golden ribbon, or a card with some ready-made phrases in it written in silvery ink and decorated with flowers.

The girl's manoeuvres began to annoy me though they satisfied some aspect of my solitary soul and gave me a covert joy. But in order not to surrender I used to rebuke her at one time and ignore her at another. Now I said:

"Go away, Semiramis."

The dove put her wings down, lowered eyelashes wet with tears, threw me an offended look and disappeared towards the big hall.

I walked a few steps, I hesitated but did not stop. I saw a cut-out mural representing priests offering their immolations to gods with the victorious king walking before them. They were carrying young billy goats, crops, sacred bread and jars with narrow necks which were undoubtedly full of date-wine. Some of them were carrying vessels filled with sweet-smelling oils. I overheard a strange noise and some mutterings. The voices grew higher until they surrounded me and were transformed into supplications and prayers in deep trembling voices full of submission and humility.

I felt her springing up from under my foot, rising sharp and hot, overflowing my body and covering me up with her fires. She came to me from the depths of the Netherworld. She must be the goddess Erishkigal of death. She was trying to persuade me, squirting out her black magic and luring me.. I used to resist her, shake the echoes of voices off my body and murmur:

"I'll save myself from her and win a victory over her."

I had thought that the passage of years would change this and weaken the influence of those unknown worlds on my soul, but I had been mistaken. Everything came back, stronger and more powerful than ever before. And I said:

"I'll go on. I won't give way to terror."

Sweat dripped from my body and covered my forehead. I staggered like a willow tree before the the south wind, when a small smooth hand was extended to me to support me and offer me the tin of apple juice. Semiramis said:

"You may be thirsty. Take and drink. We are in the other hall; I'm going before you tell me to do so."

My head was filled with voices, my heart with sorrow, and my soul with fear. I was terrified by the return of the numbness and dizziness and I said:

"I'll wander about the halls."

I hurried as if driven by a strange desire towards the depth of the hall. I was alone, surrounded by many things which I did not recognise. I was then a lonely willow tree, not understanding a thing, whose branches were trembling with fear. I stopped and occupied myself with a trivial thing — opening the tin of apple-juice. The sweet smell leaped out, dense and sharp. At that moment the hall became a vast empty island except for the white stone statue in the middle.

I went towards it as though I was possessed by magic. Looking at it from a distance, the statue was looking at me with two wide Sumerian eyes, its thin lips trying to utter some unknown words in a voice I could not understand. The praying voices went up again and I was submerged in a light that dazzled my eyes; then I realized that the voices and the light were emerging from myself, from the depths of my heart. I stopped.

"Come on, come closer, fear nothing."

I thought I got closer obeying that call, and heard a voice that had a melodious human tone.

"Come, come closer."

I was perplexed, gazing into the stone face, feeling in my veins a sweet nectar that had the strength of elation and a taste of fear.

Oh, God . What a miracle. It's him, the dear face, the firm features, the little parted lips and the horn-like eyebrows. That is his face, with its firm expression and power that is a mixture of desire and indulgent contemplation.

The attendant of the hall approached me and said:

"Discovered recently; we added it to the hall only a few days ago. It's Gudea, the Sumerian governor of Lagash."

The attendant passed on, without noticing the state I was in. I may have uttered some words, or I may have called him by his name, for I glimpsed a glow shining out of his eyes that moved their stony stiffness for a moment, and shone with a loving glance in which all my life was manifest.

I got close to him, touched his forehead, passed by fingers over the scars on his valuable stones engraved by thousands of years, tempests, floods, horses' hooves, and wheels, and I thought I saw, under the outer surface of smooth stone, veins full of hot blood and from that blood the call came out and snatched me from the earth. I extended my hand in apprehension and worship; my heart palpitated.

Under my fingers, I felt the hair of the strong chin and saw the lips opening more and more. In the midst of vague astonishment, eagerness and magic accedence, I bent over him. I felt like somebody walking in their sleep. I bent over



him, my lips touched his, then I retreated before this face whose presence possessed me. I became absent from this world; then I woke up.

It's Jawad. Oh, my God, what a miracle. Jawad leaves the world of death and in his eyes is the glitter of gold. Gudea brings him in, penetrating history. Those Sumerian eyes of his burning with love, his lips, the colour of his face, his smell and his voice. Then, suddenly, voices of marble, stone and copper ring out and chant the hymn of immortality from the book of the dead:

*Neither did I die nor did my name...*

*Neither did I die nor did my name...*

The chanting voices, the cold voices mingled with the warm, soft and green voice of Jawad.

"Come to me.. help me up... come closer."

It was his old vivid voice and I saw him before me and heard his words which I had never forgotten as he was talking to me about the idea of life, death, immortality and time from the point of view of our ancestors — the early Iraqis. I listened to him in bewilderment and I changed into a statue of wheat and water, a statue of dates and sour milk. I flew back to my ancestors in a boat of reeds. I flow like sweet date-syrup across the distance of time. When he felt my flowing from between his fingers to the past, he tried to curb my magic accedence to the idea of my ancestors by saying:

"As for us, Nihal, we've realized after them that we do not cross life except once, and in the end we go, neither winners nor losers. We go naked and pure, just as we entered it; we carry nothing but our agony and the ashes of our dreams. We leave for the others some of our dying light and our names that will not die."

I heard this seven years ago and I was transformed into a river of date-syrup and flowed into the court of an old temple.

Jawad hurried to collect me, to gather my date-palm blood with his hands and to get it frozen with words, love and patience; then to re-shape me with the skill of a great craftsman. We studied in the Department of Archaeology and we possessed hands capable of feeling the time, feeling the texts of our ancestors which were written on stone or clay, while our eyes used to stop for hours on a Sumerian text without knowing whether it was a magic spell, a love poem, or a document for possession. We passed those years in violent rushes: we used to steal our love meetings and laugh at our clever tricks in inventing our own entertainment. In love, there was that sweet connivance between two creatures making their secrets by cheating the direction of the wind.

We had journeys with the students of Archaeology to Ur, Babylon, Nineveh, and Khorsabad and visited many temples. We wandered for years in the halls of our museum — our ancestors' house that is crowded with ages. We were submerged by the rapture of excavations and compliance to love. We used to hold the past — our great past — and hide it in our ribs as a treasure for a very near future. In those hot days, I began to hear voices calling from the height of the steles crowned by gods, kings and symbols of heaven and it was then I first felt the symptoms of dizziness, numbness and strange shuddering.

I imagined that I had heard the sighs of the imprisoned statues and their appeals to me to save them from their eternal captivity inside their stone bodies; and had felt their arms extending to me with their cold fingers pricking my flesh. When I told Jawad of what I felt, saw, and heard, he stood quiet for a moment, took my hand in his hands, looked in my face with wonder, and scrutinized my features as if he saw me for the first time or did not see me at all.

He said nothing, looked down with his hand holding mine, pressing it rather hard, with a vague smile on his face and said:





"Don't tell this to anybody, there can be some kind of exaggeration in it, you may be tired. Aren't you tired, Nihal?"

"I hear them just as I hear you. I hear hymns, sighs and appeals."

He patted my shoulder like a wise father whose wisdom did not work with his silly little girl and said decisively:

"Forget the matter; forget it."

When we graduated, Jawad chose for his M.A.'s research the Neo-Sumerian Period and confined it to the age of Gudea, the governor of Lagash. He started studying his inscription, tablets, statues, and what is left of his temples.

I collected the data of my research on "The Forms of Worshipping the Sumerian Inanna (Ishtar) in Mesopotamia" and the pressure of my dizzy feeling and numbness began to increase whenever I entered the museum or its library to work. Jawad turned his attention to Gudea and they began to exchange secrets, warm feelings, jokes and promises.

Everybody noticed the attacks of this damned vague disease and the strange fits which befell me while I was moving inside the halls of the museum and its library. I consulted a doctor, according to some advice, but that made no change. When I became quite feeble by the recurrence of these fits, Jawad suggested that I should abstain from visiting the museum and its library.

"And my work in my research?"

"You can do that at home."

"That's impossible."

"You'll have to choose between two things: getting your degree which will lead you to collapse, or keeping what is left of your strength to face life. Leave the ancestors' affairs for me alone. Isn't it enough that one of us travels to those remote times and the other stays in this time?"

It was difficult to take a decision, and a puff of ash covered my face when I poured water on the firebrand of enthusiasm. I

gave up work; not only that but I hurried, out of my need for money and fearing I might change my mind, to take the job of a history teacher in a secondary school for girls. I threw myself into the midst of a flood of perfumes, bodies, chats and women's sorrows — a crowd of women teachers, transformed into forms of life that are constant and repeat themselves. They resemble one another like twins; limited skills, poor aspirations and curbed ambitions, followed by repeated and almost regular visits to astrologers or fortune-tellers. They resort to palmistry, futile waiting for bridegrooms who will never come, while at home the other beautiful dumb female, my mother, whose silence fills my head with apprehension and cries. We never had a dialogue except by glances, smiles or perhaps sighs, touching hands, kisses or tears. We were two women who intensified the smell and sorrows of the female in the house of silence where the smell and sorrow become a banner that points to us and to our solitude.

Long days passed in which I missed the great joy that I found in the air of work shared by Jawad and myself, during our movements between the college and the libraries, the museum and the ancient cities. After his being occupied by his research, we could rarely meet, and sometimes two weeks would pass without our seeing each other.

One evening Jawad fell on us like a light coming from the heart of the day. My mother was pleased and surprised by my great happiness. He sat near my mother, took out of his pocket a small box and opened it. From its inside glittered two gold rings and a chain with a pearl hanging from it, in a network of gold wire. He said to her in a clever manner:

"My family send their congratulations and they will come soon. I hope you don't mind."

Before she answered with a nod of her head, he rose and kissed her forehead, his ring glittered on my finger, and his chain hung on my neck with its glittering, full-rounded fruit.





He whispered to me:

"You like pearls because they have a living past in the depths of water. I know you don't like the still hewn stones, my pearl..."

Then he said:

"Nihal, I have to travel, I'll chase Gudea in the museums of the world, and when I finish my work and get my research discussed we shall get married. I hope that I'll be worthy of your waiting."

I did not say anything; I was proud and heart-broken.

He said:

"I love you more than anyone else in the world. You'll wait my return but I think I am worth the weary waiting, aren't I?"

"Who else have I got in the world? But I'm afraid that when you come back you'll find that I have withered and have become good for nothing."

He bent over me and kissed my forehead with a gesture of apology and gratitude trying to reassure my heart with peace.

I cried. He wanted to compensate me with emotion for the deprivation that was coming. He looked at me, fondly and apologetically, and I thought:

"I'll lose Jawad after I have given up my life's project — my research".

And said to myself:

"You'll get used to broken-heartedness and loss."

I imagined him going away from me and saw him wandering in streets inhabited by noise and crowds, with his hands running along the stones of statues, or touching a hand of pale white skin. To his clothes will hang saucy perfumes and on his body will fall strange fingers which are ignorant of affection and the noble constant attachment.

Two weeks after his departure, his first letter arrived, then letters came one after the other from all the cities. In them there was that secret spirit which bound us and made me with him beautiful, loving and loved. Though the letters were full with news about Gudea and details about his statues and scripts, I came across the secret string which gave life to me:

"Nihal... I met Gudea in the Louvre, worshipping or sitting, and I was sad for him to be captive of this eternal pause, looking out with dignity and some kind of boredom at the faces of strangers, trying to conceal his sorrows in the solidity of the black duraeate stone.

"You can't imagine, Nihal, the fascination of his crossed delicate hands unless you contemplate your own hands, the hands of a lover with thin fingers and vivid veins and smooth elegant nails. The sensitive, comprehensive hand that is skilful at divulging and concealing, desire, hesitation and praying; your hand, not the fleshy, heavy and inanimate hand. Gudea has the hands of a loving worshipper and a sad man. I love you through him. He and I are two strangers in strange cities. I love you.

"Nihal, I found him a prisoner in Karlsburg Museum in Copenhagen. He was distressed, in spite of his loftypause in the loneliness of the cold country. In Berlin Museum, I cried before him and was shocked by the shudder of fear and sorrow at seeing Gudea as a young man with features full of hope. I felt something pulling me towards him; some secret. I must try hard to reveal it.

"Nihal, they are tours which break the heart. I met Gudea in the British Museum, bareheaded, submissive, and with a face full of imploring for his goddess. I saw him while he was growing more mysterious and older. His forehead has wrinkled and his face has become thinner. I have added a new chapter in my research: the secret of Gudea's sorrow and the reason for the spread of his statues in the temples of Lagash and its suburbs. He is defying me; please help me with your patience to enable me to reveal the secret so that your waiting and my suffering won't be long."

Two years passed with Jawad searching in the museums for the secret of Gudea. I was occupied in my life which extended between the school and the house of solitude and waiting. My work made me tired, which cured my sleeplessness and made me inanimate, like a cut trunk of a date-palm which had been made a bridge for crossing.

Jawad came back. His features had changed so much and they resembled the features of Gudea— his only sincere bosom friend, for he had long gazed at his face, imitated his appearance, questioned him and adopted his unknown sorrows.





He kissed me while the stony statue was standing between us with all its rigidity and cold might. The dizziness came back to me. I cried.

He told me about his long journey, trying to fill the space between us. He said:

"I'll compensate for the days of waiting. All you have to do is to inspire me with the ability to work to finish the research, so that we can get married. Without you, I can't do anything. You know how much I need you."

I didn't say anything. He was trying to please me by giving special importance for my being with him, a certain importance, not for his life or love, but for his work—an assistant and complementary tool that could do nothing by itself.

I was hurt by his premeditated intention to ignore my ambition and my restive soul and the silence about my research. Giving it up had shattered me. I became a nervous woman, always on the verge of anger, crying unexpectedly, pretending to feel self-satisfaction and harmony to cover up my grief which devoured me and chewed at my bones. Then along came Jawad to give a touch of inspiration to the waiting woman, who will be "useful" to him in achieving his work. He said:

"Nihal, we'll live in a real paradise when we marry. Our love will be ever-blooming even after we get older and I'll take you to all the cities and show you the greatest museums and treasures."

I interrupted impatiently:

"What shall I do with the museums of the world? I want

you, here on this land, among the people we know. Look. I've become a woman like the others. What are they waiting for? Nothing except a man to compensate for the loss of life and the pain of giving up your ambition. Are you going to do it? Do you promise?"

The man stood in bewilderment before this bitterness and unconcealed irony in the tone of my voice. As usual, he patted my shoulder as if to conciliate an impetuous girl. But when he got closer to me and kissed my forehead, he emitted a strange smell, the smell of wild hyacinth, the delicate bluish white flower whose hot wild perfume, when crushed between fingers, is described in legends which say that this smell distinguishes brave men whose life is enclosed in mystery and anxiety and who are destined for mysterious ends. Being occupied with this idea, I forgot my pain. The sunshine came back to my soul. At night, after days of hard work, I open my window for the night and the cold darkness. I sit alone and wait for something to happen. I have nobody to talk to. My mother is dumb and Jawad talks to Gudea. I recall the events of my life. I was a star that flashed and burned, and here I am now, a cold meteor covered with ashes. I taught my schoolgirls to be firm and said to them:

"Don't retreat; the pain of surrender is heaviest on the soul."

I used to stand before the window, pierced by arrows of scents and dark voices. In the sky before me, the tears and gods were plotting the destinies of mankind and throwing them about like boys playing with small balls.

My mother is disabled by her dumbness. She is beautiful but disabled. But I who have my voice, have I been able to avoid disability? What's the difference: I am a small ball tossed about by celestial bodies and thrown somewhere.

I hear the telephone ring and his voice comes to me in the middle of the night. I get rid of the paws of the stars and the fangs of darkness and silence and hurry to this voice. I want a voice, a man's voice. A voice of a man that I love is enough for me in the night. When he heard my trembling voice and my laboured breathing, he asked:

"Why are you gasping? Have you been rushing around the rooms of your house? Have you been cleaning the windows?"

"Jawad...Jawad."

"Listen, I have succeeded in deciphering the code of a clay tablet. You know my method in comparing the tablets with each other. Listen, that took me a whole week. I'm very happy now. That will make a whole chapter in my research. I told them this morning that nobody would decipher the code of the new tablet except me. You know me well, I am qualified for challenge and victory."

I was like someone falling from the wing of an eagle to the earth. I was falling to the dust surrounded by leaves, pieces of clouds, scents, pens, and the rest of a voice of a man that I loved: separated letters of some tenderness, transparent





letters which love used to penetrate. When he finished talking about the tablet and the Sumerian text, he wished me good night in a solid voice and steadfast letters and went back to Gudea and deserted me.

After his research had been discussed and after he had declared that he had not discovered the secret of Gudea's life which he had traced for two years, his supervisor suggested that he could add it later in an appendix if he ever found it.

Before he started his job in the Sumerian department in the museum, the war on our eastern border had entered its second year. So Jawad joined the battlefield and left Gudea in peace between my hands.

He said:

"We'll get married in spring, on the first of April, Akitu day, the beginning of the ancient Iraqi year. I will take you to an old temple, anoint your head with sweet-smelling oil and we'll kneel together before the Great Inanna."

I looked at him: this strange child of metamorphoses, soon changes from a solid man into a cloud of poetry. This child who is fond of work changes quickly into a legendary creature who lives in all ages at all times and mingles them together skilfully. He talks about love and war in the same tone: two great deeds that make events and history. Fighting: his fighting and those with him against enemies coming from the centuries of darkness. Battle after battle, he gets nearer to Gudea who repelled the aggression of the King of Ansan in Elam and gained victory over him. In many moments the faces of the two men are mixed up before me and I get perplexed: How will this man manage our life in the future while a wanderer between the times? After the war the man was transformed into a voice, a tree, a bird and a cloud. He became a real lover. Before that he was a man like many other men: I used to hear the voice, embrace the tree, follow the flight of the bird, and wait for the rain of the cloud.

In his last leave, he gave me his draft research.

"We publish it, Nihal, and if we discover anything new during this period we can add to it. Otherwise, it'll be an appendix to be published later, separately. Listen to me, you will follow the stages of its printing and take care of the footnotes and the references especially."

"When you come back in a month's time, we'll do the proof-reading."

"Are you carzy, Nihal? Do I come from the battlefield to do the proof-reading? I think you haven't realised yet the meaning of a loving soldier coming back from the battlefield."

"Yes, I realise that."

"Then I'll come to you every time as a soldier back from the battlefield...so don't be surprised by anything."

I thanked God in my heart; Gudea has changed into a manuscript, nothing more, and he is now, in my hands, a memory of a great past and a symbol of rare Sumerian heroism.



I looked at Jawad's face which was filled with new things made up of affection, desire, longing, power and some anxiety. His gestures, words and the movements of his hands bespoke of the bravery of his soul: a man desired by all women. Inside him, a fountain of light. I knew people who had dark walls in their chests and horny skins like tortoiseshell to drive away the sorrows, joys and entertainment. I said:

"This is a man worthy of my love."

He said, and his eyes blurred as if in a dream:

"Nihal, in the battle, while we were in the middle of flames, the springs of blood, the rumbling noise of explosions and the claws of splinters, as we were advancing towards the positions of our enemy, day and night, I used to hear a voice coming from a far away place and time saying to me: Young man, protect us and don't let an enemy touch the temples of Lagash or a stranger get close to the walls of Sumer, and protect Sumeria from any harm.' The call was repeated many times and the echo of the deep voice followed me everywhere."

My mother brought in the tea, diffusing the aroma of cardamom with home-made pastry stuffed with dates and almonds. Jawad sipped his cup quickly and looked at me, fascinated by my beautiful blue silk gown. He said:

"Would you like to go out? Nihal, you look gorgeous in that dress. Nihal, promise you wouldn't wear mourning clothes if I died but would live your life as it is, for we live but one life which we leave neither winners nor losers, but naked and pure."

I embraced him with his head on my bosom. I was immersed in the scent of hyacinth of the fields, so I cried. I stayed for a moment, hiding the dear face which was crossed by prophecy and avoided looking in the eyes in which the future was clear.





Jawad felt my sobbing and said:

"Why are you crying? Here, I'm in your arms now, nobody is immortal in this world. Come on, wipe your tears off and let's go out. Come on, let your hair down."

And he began to take my hair clips off and ran his fingers through my hair with movements that lacked skill. I felt elated and frightened as he kissed my head, so I snatched his hand, kissed it passionately and pressed it to my bosom.

He said:

"Listen, Nihal. It seems that I can't wait until April to get married. Forget about the Babylonian Akitu day, forget about my silly fondness of the rites of the past, and prepare yourself to marry me in a month's time... in January ..."

Twenty days later, Jawad came to me and the voice was hushed, the tree had fallen, the bird had gone to sleep and the cloud had gone: he came back a martyr. I cried with tears of nectar. I was the fruit that death squeezed and the juice of its soul would drop, tear after tear, until it dries up. It has become dry: no tears... his ring is lighting the darkness of my sad hand and his pearl is heaving on my chest like a white sigh and a washed desire; his desire which was shining over my soul; solid, round and kept in a gold net, signed with his name.

After several months, the pearl rested between my neck and my bosom. I rose and pursued the publishing of his research; and in the first memorial of his martyrdom came out: "Gudea, the Ruler of Lagash, and his Golden Age."

I took the first copy and went to him. I had planted, during the months of my silence, a small garden round his grave of myrtle and damask rose shrubs. I used to be afraid to whisper anything to him. But today, I'll tell him whatever occurs to me and will listen to his voice which will rise. I hear him, I hear him.

He said:

"Nihal, go to them. They have found the statue which has a script on it that explains the secret of Gudea."

I woke up suddenly from bewilderment, and a shudder came over my body at hearing his soft green voice. I felt the pearl between my neck and bosom and it was warm and shaking as if it was throbbing.

A week after my visit to the graveyard, I decided to do something. I'll visit the museum with my schoolgirls. I was afraid to go alone after that absence, but Jawad's call, which came to me from beyond life inflamed my enthusiasm, and when I got close to the museum, I felt I was entering the labyrinth of a dream and changing into a phrase in a legend.

Now, while I am standing before the statue, I feel his strong hand, the wing, the branch, the cloud take me, so I close my eyes and receive his little consecutive kisses like drops of rain.

"Are you Gudea or Jawad? Is it you? Is it him? Or are you the two together?"

The light of the projector fell on it and penetrated its smooth white stone and I felt that it was lighting and fire inside its depths and changed the whole into pink, then into crimson, then into the colour of a living skin: a human skin. Suddenly, I remembered the rituals of reanimation—the rite of opening the mouth—which our ancestors used to practise to make life flow in the statues of gods and kings in the temples.

Opening the mouth, lighting the eyes, reading incantations, wiping the face with sesame oil and pouring the nectar between the two open lips, then life will flow in stone and the tears will fall from the eyes of the statue and change into valuable jewellery. Our ancestors believed that shedding tears was an exalted human deed that changed stone into a human being, who would go down to the city to marry one of its girls, to give him a heavenly son who might be great hero, a king or a sacred god.

The light trembled for a moment as if it realized the strangeness of the miracle and it seemed to me that the two lips trembled under it. I poured some apple juice in my hand, put it on the lips and was surprised to see it dry and disappear. I repeated that several times and the marble absorbed all the nectar. When I touched the face, I felt a warmth of the man I had embraced to my soul like a tree. His eyes threw me a human glance. Time around me stood still and I cried.

"I did not die, neither did my name. So, why are you crying and why are you flooding the earth with your tears?"

"For that I cry".

"Cheer up, then, and let delight get in your heart".

I retreated, ran down the hall like a possessed woman and as I looked back at it I saw the miracle! It was shedding tears. At home I never cried, but some hot and strange joys burst in myself as if they were consecutive fires similar to our little fireworks which we call "the eye of the sun" or "scattered stars". When I looked at myself in the mirror, I found it



shining and beautiful and I remembered everything: On my lips there was a taste of old kisses and on my arm the touches of green fingers, touches of fire, and touches of nectar...

I put on a nightgown with the colour of emerald-bluish green and tied its ribbons on my shoulders. I had bought it for our wedding but never touched it before. When the pearl hung down on the herbal colour, it flashed and quivered. The wrinkles of my sorrow and the white hairs in my hair reminded me of the passage of time but I forgot it while putting on the nightgown of my wedding. I said to myself:

"You are still beautiful, Nihal. This neck, bosom, shoulders, and this sweetness that love sparkles around you..."

I put my hair down as he used to like it. I opened his letters, scattered his papers, drafts and marvellous presents around me and sat in the middle of the orchard of the past like a green myrtle shrub with one pearly flower.

I read his living words, touched his papers which his fingers held and cried when the scent of hyacinth blew at me. O God, the hyacinth's scent again. My body trembled and the nectar came up to my mouth. Then, my door opened, Jawad entered, extended his hand to my face, took hold of my hand, helped me up and kissed me. It's Jawad, this is his smell, this is his striped shirt and these are his fingers...

"O God, you, Jawad, you?"

"Don't shout, calm down, darling."

"Where did you come from? What are you?"

"I was very thirsty this morning."

"And I gave you the apple nectar by my hand."

"You? Was it you who did it?"

"Who else could do that? I performed all the rituals".

"Why? Why did you do that to me? Is it for losing me again?"

"I won't let you go..."

"But I am going, so don't let hope mislead you... I am going there."

"I go with you."

"No, take these papers. You'll find in them the Sumerian text that I managed to decipher, the secret of Gudea. Give it to them. And if you wanted to see me again, you might find me somewhere... on a platform in a railway station, on a bridge, near a museum, or behind a graveyard. You might find me everywhere. Now, come on, sit down on the bed and let me see your face well."

I looked at him and he was incredibly beautiful. I said to myself: this is the beauty of death, the cruel eternal beauty, the unchangeable beauty. He said,

"You are more beautiful than before. You are thrilling, Nihal."

He came closer and closer to me, kissed me, touched my shoulders and breast, pressed the pearl on my bosom with his fingers and the gold network hurt me. The false desire was changing into delicate affection, then it was soon revealed and

I smelt it and surrendered to it.

A moment later, I was flying with my cloud and bird in an eternal sky, having no age and no tomorrow, and on my hair a bouquet of myrtle and pearls. The man's smell and his desires were crowning my head and under me, the times, museums, houses, deserts, the two rivers, temples, and date-palms slept.

When I flew down at "the rivers' mouth" I did not find our forefather Utunabistim. In fact, I did not want to see him, as I did not need his consultation. I knew where the plant of immortality was. Undoubtedly, Utunabistim was asleep at "the rivers' mouth" waiting with boredom the arrival of an anxious or adventurous offspring.

I woke up. Jawad's head was resting on my knee as he was kneeling before the bed.

He said:

"Now, I'm leaving, I've achieved what I've come for." I clung to him and cried.

"It is not as you imagine. Heaven has predestined the fate of mankind and held up immortality for gods alone."

I cried and cried.

"Cheer up and don't cry. Live your life and don't give way to sorrow, for that is the lot of mankind. Farewell. I can't stay, Farewell."

At dawn, I woke up from my trance as I was feeling the remains of his hands' warmth on my body when my fingers stumbled upon the bloody scratch which his pearl made under my neck. I took the papers which he left on my bed and read them.

"I Gudea, the Ruler of Lagash, with the wisdom of my great god Ningirshu, have united the people of Lagash like the children of one mother and I have brought peace of mind into every house. I defeated my enemies in Elam and filled their hearts with horror. I caused the globe to be enveloped by the light of my god like a robe and put my picture (statue) everywhere in Lagash and in its temples to present my appeal to my mediator the god Ningishzida so that he might give me back my beloved woman Nansha who went down in a boat of reeds to the lower world. A touch by the hand of the goddess Bau might bring her back to life."

I dedicated myself to the peace and glory of Sumeria and my god Ningirshu blessed me but the guard of Eresh Kigal kidnapped the mistress of my heart. My god will inflict his curse on whoever touches Lagash or disgraces the body of my sacred woman Nansha — the offspring of the goddess Bau. Like the water of Euphrates, she ran from my hand and made sorrow my destiny. I, the powerful, the protector of Sumeria, my heart will not know happiness unless I meet Nansha. I'll perform the ritual prayers and sacrifice immolations until she comes back and takes me in a boat of reeds to the river of life."

It was raining heavily while I wandered between the station and the bridge. The train had moved, the train going down to



the south. From its windows, the faces of the soldiers looked out. They were scorched by the sun, fire and love. I imagined that I saw his face among those, and perhaps I saw waving to me with his black beret among tens of hands. I called and called but the train had gone.

I went near the graveyard, walked about near the museum and went back to the bridge and station without finding him. Was he deceiving me?

I photocopied the Sumerian text with its translation and kept the original copy and headed to the museum. Before I went to the man described to me by Jawad, I went into the Sumerian hall. I did not have the dizziness, neither did I hear anything. I looked at the statues and needles and they were still in their eternal solidity. I did not tremble or feel numbed. When I arrived at the place of the statue, I couldn't find it. It had disappeared. I was afraid to ask. I went out of the hall in a hurry and went to the man to whom Jawad sent the text in a long envelope.

"This is sent to you from a man who knows you. He said it contains an important document."

"Would the lady like to sit down?"

"Thank you. I am in a hurry, I don't have time."

Without saying good-bye, I went out to the street and walked aimlessly for two hours. Both Jawad and Gudea disappeared but they did not die. I wandered in the streets like a small tempest. The waters of the rain were shining and reflecting the sunshine to buildings and glass and on the faces of passers-by. In the car which took me to the graveyard I felt the wet cold caused by rain. When I crossed the graves to where the garden of myrtle and damask rose stood, I did not find the grave. The shrubs were forming a fence on an oblong piece of land covered with fresh short grass among which little violet clovers had bloomed. At the edges of the oblong stretched the fresh and green leaves of the hyacinth extending their tender sprigs towards an old mulberry tree. Larks leapt here and there, pigeons cooed and golden leaves fell down from the tree while I was leaning on its wet trunk, exhausted and perplexed. From among all the voices, a soft green voice came to my ear:

I haven't died, neither has my name.

I haven't died, neither has my name.

#### Footnotes

1. I borrowed the title of the story, as you may see, from *The Epic of Gilgamesh* — "It was he who saw..."
2. Puabi, the Sumerian Queen of Ur, who had been known until recently as Shubad due to an error in pronouncing the Sumerian syllable of her name.
3. Eresh Kigal: A Sumerian goddess, Ishtar's sister and the Ruler of Hell—the underworld. Hearing the hymns here refers to the beginning of the interference of times and mixing between death and life before Niha.
4. Gudea: The Prince or Ruler of Lagash (2060 B.C.). He resorted dignity and glory to Lagash after it had been destroyed by invaders. He built 50 temples in it and provided for it a just, peaceful and prosperous life. Gudea launched a military mission in which he defeated the King of Anshan in Elam. It is believed that Anshan is Masjid Suleiman in present-day Iran. The Elamites' ambitious designs stopped after this defeat of theirs, so Gudea had the time to build the civilization of Lagash which was recognised for the flourishing culture, art and economy. Gudea's statues are considered to be the most wonderful art of Sumerian sculpture. Historians compare Gudea to the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius in his philosophy, ideas, and prosperity of his age.
5. Inanna: This is the Sumerian name for Ishtar, the goddess of fertility, love and war — and motherhood some other times. She is the mistress of godly laws. She was worshipped in all the centres of civilization in Mesopotamia and areas influenced by the ideas and civilization of the Iraqis.
6. Semiramis: One of its meanings, according to Greek author Diodorus, is "dove". She is the great Assyrian queen about whom many myths were told.
7. Akitu: The new year in ancient Iraq which falls between the end of March and the beginning of April. In it is related the story of creation *Enuma Elish* (When on high...) and the rituals of sacred marriage are performed between the king and the priestess who plays the goddess Ishtar. Dumuzi (July) rises from its death and the processions of all the gods come from the cities to participate in the celebration of regained fertility and life on earth.
8. Professor A.L. Oppenheim in his essay *Ancient Mesopotamia* wrote about the rituals of "opening the mouth" and reanimation and remarks that complicated and secret rituals were performed to transform a solid material of statues of kings and gods into a vessel that receives the heavenly god. So the statues, which were often hewn in workshops inside the temple, were formed with open eyes and mouths in order to receive the rituals of opening the mouth and reanimation which the priests performed. The statues of Gudea were exceptions to this rule. The ancestors believed that the statue, after this performance, changes into a living framework which is capable of communicating and talking to gods.
9. The rivers' mouth is the position where Utunabistim, the immortal forefather of mankind as described in the Gilgamesh epic lives. He is the one who retold the story of the "the blood" and guided him to the "source of life".
10. Gudea's statues are divided now among the world museums and the personal collections of amateur archaeologists. They are valuable antiques, beyond price for their significance in understanding the change that came over Sumerian sculpture in its modern age, and for the valuable texts inscribed on them. They also present a living picture of the civilized life, religious concepts and thinking in the Neo-Sumerian period.

Translated by Saleh M. al-Hafidh



## Short Story

# Soldier's Message

By Mohammed Khudhayir



It was two o'clock in the afternoon when the small procession of three cars stopped at the iron gates of the cemetery. The mourners had to wait a while before the door-keeper came to let them in. A small pick-up carrying the flag-wrapped coffin went through, followed by the two other cars. After a short drive along the gravel-covered path inside the cemetery, they stopped at a newly-dug grave where he was to be buried. His father, mother, brothers and friends were watching quietly, with grim faces. Outside the cemetery everything became quiet after the long-range artillery stopped shelling the town. A column of light was falling from an opening in the clouds, piercing the gloom around the cemetery, but no one noticed it.

"Mum and dad, brothers, pals.....

I am not afraid of death any more. I fought bravely for six days in the depths of hell. The battle is over now. We have just started mopping up the reeds. Fire surrounds us on all sides. The flames flicker in the middle of the marshes. The wind is pushing the smoke, and pieces of burnt clothes and reeds are flying here and there. I waded through the shallow waters of the marshes and kept on falling, hundreds of times. I came face to face with a number of the invaders and I was shooting in every direction. I have not slept for three nights now. I have started to forget how food tastes. Mud still covers my arms, and my face is filthy. I can't wash it.

Scenes of killing are still invading my memory. I can't push them away, nor the moments of despair and fear. I can't forget the shrinking faces, the grey features, the gory wounds, the burnt arms and legs, the teeth, the smiling lips, the withered eyes. They are all surrounding me. I can still hear the yells, the cries of anger, of hatred or pain and the murmurings. The



frightened looks, blood, mud, beards, bullets, fallen weapons, dirty khaki, hell, hell, hell; how many names can you find for 'hell'?

You can call it as many as you like, but you have to find a way out of this maze. The battle is over, the doors of hell are closed. After this horrifying battle I will live a long time. Death is far from me. I feel very well. I fought violently to come out of here alive and go back to my home. The guns fell silent except for the artillery that keeps on pounding regularly. Yet there is no time to waste. Any laxity could tip the balance in their favour.

I have been ordered to guard a meandering waterway with a number of men. There are virtually hundreds of these waterways in the marshes branching out between numerous little islands. Our mission: to prevent the enemy infiltrating through this waterway. We hid in the thick reeds on both sides of the water. Nobody answers my calls. The roots of the reeds and the thick green water absorb my voice. The waterway cuts through the reeds and widens to form an open pond, then it narrows again leaving the pond and disappearing behind the reeds. The wind is moving the reeds as if someone is looking for something behind them. Some hidden power, pushing continuously from far away is moving the still face of the water.

Hundreds of little objects are floating on the surface, pieces of the burnt huts, boxes, tins... a pile of fragments enters the pond, moving under my nose. I see the bow of a boat emerging from the other opening. It was a long time before the boat came near me, moving and listing about aimlessly. It was empty, save for a squatting body. I pushed the boat away with my gun and it disappeared past one of the curves of the waterway. Hot winds carry the smell of burnt and decomposing bodies. From far away, shouts and murmurs, punctured frequently by the bangs of the bullets, can be heard. The sun penetrates deep inside the marshes stealing their solitude and darkness. More floating things appear stuck here and there. It is mid-day. The guns fall silent, but a helicopter gunship is approaching. I can see its shadow crossing the open pond over my head. Three floating helmets are coming towards me slowly under the scorching sun. Grass and roots are clinging to them, preventing them from moving freely. It must have been a long journey under the burning sun. I stretched out my arm and carefully pushed the muzzle of my gun under the strap of one of the helmets looking for a clue, a sign, a dog-tag, something which might tell who had been using it. There was nothing. Only an empty, lost helmet crossing the marshes to reach a hand like mine. I took off my own helmet and put it close to the one which was stuck in the reeds. You could not tell which was which. The same greenish metal, some scratches, stray bullets, the trenches, the shelters, days and nights, the besieged dreams and fingers which I used frequently.

I pressed my forehead against the wet helmet and listened to the wind whistling through the reeds. After a while another helmet might start its journey to the unknown with a letter or a message pinned inside to the lining by two or three bullets; a letter which reads: 'Mum and dad, brothers, pals, whoever you might be...

Hell has thousands of gates but I will come through alive and reach home. But before that, you must tell the kids that we fought bravely.... and so on.'

The helmet might reach nowhere. It might get stuck by the reeds or be overturned. It might sink. Or it might get somewhere after a while, the great river for example, after

days or months or even years. It might lose its way, dither in front of one of hell's doors. By then the war will be over and the lads will have gone home. One day, after years and years, the helmet will rest in front of a guard's cabin and the river. He will be taken by surprise to see a piece of wet paper with illegible words on it and perhaps he will turn it over many times. He will knock on top of the helmet, and keep on looking for a sign. After all, he also fought in the marshes beyond this river. He will return to his cabin with the helmet and hang it on the wall by his bed....

\*\*\*\*\* The grave is closed. The mourners picked up a handful of sand, each, and threw it into the wet grave, recited a few verses of the Holy Qur'an and walked slowly away. The three cars moved away on the same path, overlooked only by the lamp-posts. The door-keeper closed the gate behind the cars and the mourners and returned with the undertakers to their rooms at the other end of the cemetery. At that moment, the column of light from the sky vanished and the opening in the clouds closed.

Translated by Hadi al-Taie





## Short Story

# Young Man, You Have a Promising Future

■ By A'id Khisbak

At last he gave in and threw his head back on the headrest of the dentist's chair. To the dentist, he looked as pale as the dead and there were two big black bruises round his eyes. He pointed to his carious tooth and said to the dentist: "Help me, please."

One suspected that there was a weak man behind such self-possession. He was trying not to groan like a wounded animal, while seeking help. He was quite prepared to do whatever the dentist thought appropriate.

This was his last chance to save himself. Things had no value when exposed to decay and his tooth had become a damned burden. Because he was prepared to do whatever the dentist felt proper, he would not object, even if the dentist wanted to cut out his tongue.

The important thing was to get rid of the pain which he could bear no more. His tongue could not move. He could not speak.

He had postponed going to the dentist as long as he could. But with the passage of days his jaw had begun to swell and the agonizing pain had increased. The swelling was creeping along his neck and up to his ear. Nevertheless, he did not lose his morale until his tongue started to fail him. His tongue has been under his control through all his life, his best supporter for forty years. By his tongue, he could get things that he did not even deserve. He lied and convinced others that he could put his hands in fire without being burned. Nobody had ever caught him out.

He was a hypocrite but thanks to his tongue he could get credit for work he actually had not done himself.

He claimed he had done favours for others and he ascribed unknown deeds to himself. He made a great fuss before his bosses at work, heaping abuse on his colleagues or hurling bad language at anyone who tried to stand in his way.



His tongue helped him to chat-up people who were certain that he was deceiving them. But to avoid his abuse they gave in to his deception.

Eventually, he felt that his tongue was getting heavier and bigger, and when his tongue touched his teeth he suffered great pain. Whenever he wanted to talk he felt that there was a lump filling his mouth, making him catch his breath, causing even more pain.

At the beginning he ignored what was going on inside his mouth. He set out on his untamable tongue as on a horse, and went over open plains. But the horse started to stumble. Then it fell down and did not rise again.

When he was asked the secret behind his change of expression, he would say firmly that nothing ailed him. People would say: "That's right, you have incomparable will", and he would then display his bright feathers like a peacock. Giving in to change was more than he could bear.

He got used to closing his eyes and breathing his pain. His mouth throbbed all night, like a splinter settling in some place or like a boil as big as a fist.

He kept pretending that nothing had happened.

To avoid showing anything, he remained silent. It would be relieved one day.

He did not talk but listened to the people whom he met on his way or those with whom he worked. They all praised his



endurance. First, he was filled with pleasure, as he felt superior, even in enduring pain. But he discovered that his suffering was something personal and that all the praise did not relieve the pain. So he tried to console himself by convincing all those he met that they also had decaying teeth and they too might have pain and swelling at any moment.

If by chance he came across people who did not doubt that they had good teeth, he declared that they could not evade decay forever.

Though he took delight in frightening others, it was just to make up for the loss of his tongue's power. His profit from his wicked intentions did not compensate for his loss. His slow voice stammered the words out. Whenever people said sympathetic words to him, or whenever they told him that he was not the first or the last to suffer from such pain, their sympathy did not soothe him or boost his morale. Now he was equal with others, just an ordinary person.

But what could he do? He was almost going mad, not only because of the pain but also because of all comments that plucked his feathers. When, exhausted, he went to the dentist he was ready to give in.

As he threw his head back, he only had a little strength left to control himself. He was suffering from increasing pain and depression.

What he really needed was someone with whom he could discuss the recent changes, to whom he could complain about his condition, disclose his hidden feelings.

Damn it! Why did his tongue touch his teeth? Why did days seem so long?

The dentist did not ask him whether he wanted to get rid of the tooth or to save what could be saved of his tongue.

A few days after taking tranquilizers prescribed by the dentist to restore the jaw to its ordinary shape, the dentist skilfully pulled out the tooth as he had promised. Though the piece of cotton-wool, which was put in place of the tooth, was filling his mouth, he repeated his thanks to the dentist just like someone who had been reprieved. He was able to spend a pleasant night, the first for a long while.

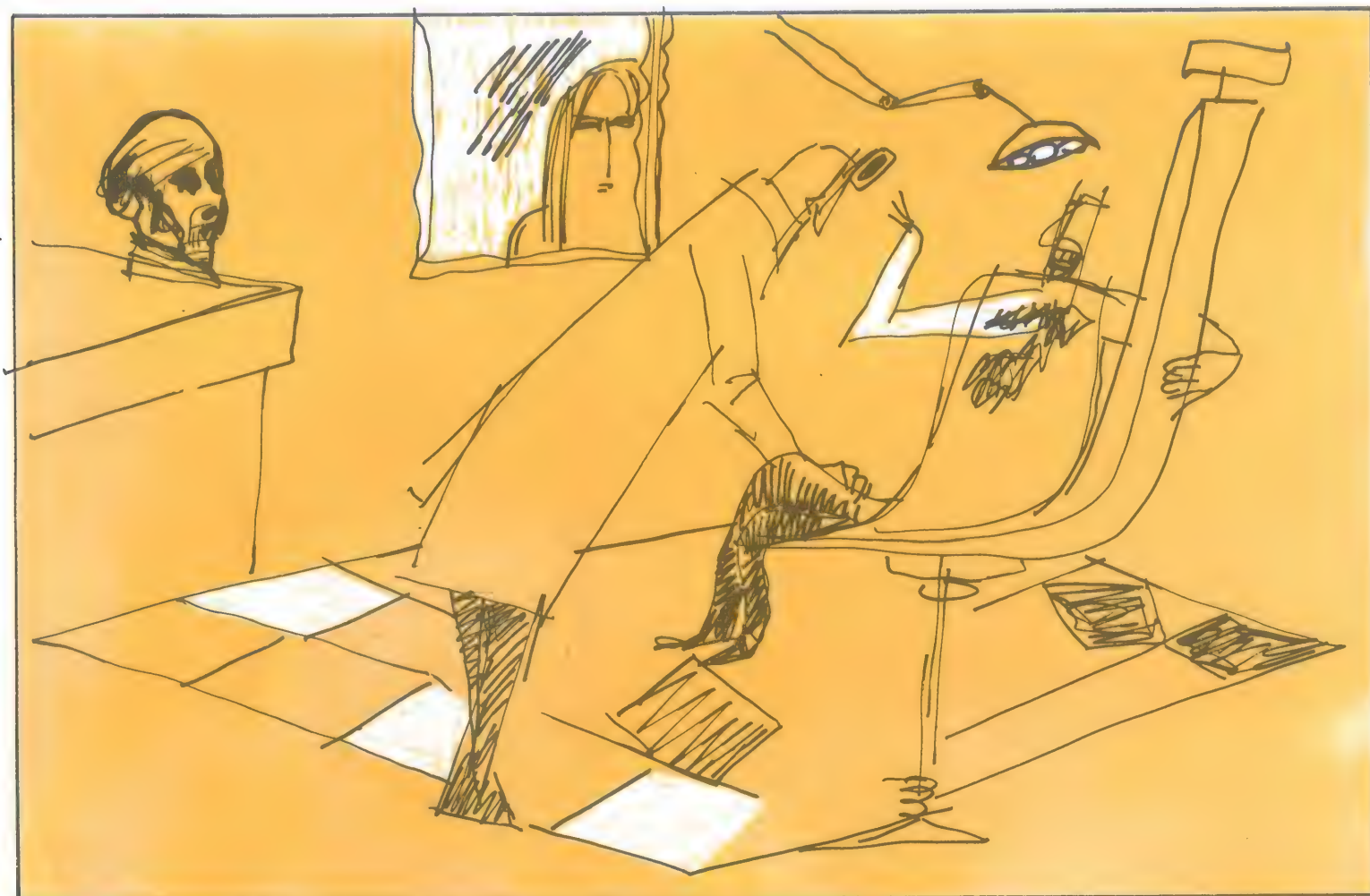
In the morning, he stood up and looked through the window of his room to the garden, his hands met over his chest as if he were showing gratitude. It made him feel happy, but he was exhausted by his recent pain.

It was only after about a week that people dared to be cheeky with him again. Such people soon recoiled after being made aware of their own limits.

Then he returned to this beautiful life where people no longer rejoiced his misfortune. He was proud of the way he had borne his pain. His feathers grew again. He would never endure pain for anyone because no one had done so for him.

He would smile, show clean and shining teeth, he would demolish anyone who dared to get in his promising way.

Future opened its arms to welcome him. Nothing could disturb the serenity of his own life now. He opened his mouth as frequently as possible. Translated by Yania S. Attallah





Short  
Story



## Clocks

■ By Lutfiyya al-Dilaimi

Since the break of day, she had been expecting something to happen: that the clocks pulsing through her house would stop ticking for some reason not yet known to her, or that her paradisiac seclusion would be invaded by new concerns. At such moments, when one let oneself go, one could come to believe in miracles and magic, a sense of possessing super senses, capable of seeing into the future. Now she felt sure that something was creeping towards her... something unknown.

She wanted to busy herself with something. He was still in bed; he was not yet awake. She had got used to busying herself with something else when he was present. On the few rare occasions when he was absent from home, she would invent various tasks, to keep busy. If she was not occupied with something, the pleasure of waiting for him was spoiled by her constant fear for him.

Twenty years ago, she began gathering information about him. She kept in mind his birthday, sign of the zodiac, colour of his eyes, the sound of his voice: she heard words he had not yet said, then. When she knew all these things, she began to love him. When he loved her, his love changed from one image into another. Images grew larger and larger, images created by the miracle of their meeting, living together, having a son and going into retreat away from the world surrounding them, the world which had delayed their meeting for fifteen years.

When they forestalled the contrivances of time and constructed their paradise, they sought to do away with all that would come from outside this paradise. Later on, they achieved self-sufficiency. They surprised others who had failed to find solutions to the problems of their lives and scared those who denounced and fought against their project. They scared them with the success they had achieved in the project of their marital life which was built on the ruins of many abortive attempts and the loss of many years of their lives.

She furtively entered his bedroom, fearing that he would discover, if he was awake, her fear of this unknown thing. She looked at his quiet face amid the silence. His breath was the only thing associating him with the flux of life. When her fear vanished and tranquility spread through the room, she placed her hand on the sleeping man's palm lightly and gently, then drew back and went out of the room.

Their life had never become shabby; on the contrary, it was renewing itself every day and protecting itself from failure in love and perhaps in seclusion too. When she stepped into the living-room, the ticking of the countless clocks surrounded her, just like a song. The beating continued to grow louder and louder until it formed an area of tunes and rhythms which were disparate, yet monotonous, rhythmically balanced and harmonious.

Again, she was overwhelmed by a sense of fear of something about to happen. Over twenty years, her intuition had never failed her about anything. Over twenty years, they had not parted with each other except for very short periods.



Once he left home, he would be parted with joy. His attachment to the paradise which they built after undergoing long suffering, challenges and passion justified his fear and his belief that nothing could make up for loss of their love and their particular world into which was woven the details of learning to have respect for life.

Sometimes, he was obliged to go to town to shop for their basic requirements, with his steps beset by wind and noises of streets, leading him to people. While walking, he would be aware of the smell of bread coming from bakeries and scents of the day, full of the hustle and bustle of people, sounds of tools being used and children chanting. He would hasten to buy all that they might need for a full month, food, drinks and new clocks fashioned by the artists concerned with time. Then, he would come back to her, carrying everything. When he was away from her, she was always struck with dismay because she had got used to spending her night and day without his voice, his movements and words. When he went out, he used to tell her "take care of yourself for the sake of us both."

Once, he suggested she accompany him to the market, for no particular reason, saying "We'll buy many things and walk about and perhaps have lunch in a restaurant to your liking." But she positively rejected his offer.

"I will stay here, waiting for you, getting everything ready for you and writing diaries." He seemed upset by her crazy attachment to home, but in secret he was pleased with this, and even felt a great deal of satisfaction after debating the matter with her.

She feared that she would lose him when he went to town, through some silly cause such as a car failing to work, a tree falling on him when the wind rose, an electric current... maybe his heart would commit the fatal mistake of failing to beat. Then, the whole universe would stop, once and for all.

Yes, she feared all this after she had made a painstaking effort to build her new life with him after giving up her career, which she had built away from him. That was what she feared although she felt assured that it would be impossible for him to quit her for anything in the world. She knew, that he, content with her love, denied himself all longing for gain; he had thrown all past desires away.

Now, he was sleeping and the clocks continued pulsing through the house, just like the human hearts of wonderful lovers. Anyhow, she would prepare breakfast for him. She would serve him a very special breakfast including warm milk, good tea and a bunch of golden narcissuses in a small cup.

He was sleeping now and the house was full of echoes, of movement of gear, of moving digitals, of quartz oscillators, of pendulous motion, of electrons, of the knocking of old-style clocks on metal frameworks, glass surfaces and firm plastic cases. All this was taking place to show the passage of time.

He woke up, followed her and gave her two kisses: one for the fresh morning and the other for the bunch of narcissuses with which she rewarded him. After having had his breakfast, he talked about some little projects and things he would do at his atelier at the top of the garden. The telephone rang: unusual for that to happen so early in the morning. She lifted the receiver and to her astonishment she heard the voice of an old friend, saying, "We would like to see you." The voice coming from the past disturbed her calm. She was at a loss for words. The voice repeated, "We'd like to see you again."

Before she had the chance to say anything, the voice said in a definite tone, "At half past ten, we will come."

"But", she uttered.

"You have had long enough in peace", the voice said, "at least we shall see your collection of strange clocks! May we come?"

"I shall wait for you," she said in a cold voice devoid of any emotion.

She rang off, reassured herself by talking to him, and freed her body from the cold shivers which the surprise had sent down her back, by holding his hand to soothe away her panic.

"Someone must have learned the secret of our happiness and some chatterer who knows us revealed our secret, and our interest in the clocks. You or I must have made a mistake," she said.

"For a month, I haven't met any of our old friends," he protested.

"Who, then, gave us away? What has made them remember me? A long time ago, they ceased to try to meet me after making only futile attempts," she said.

"It could be our son, driven by his great pride in his parents," he suggested.

"I can't believe that; he is too prudent," she answered.

The day became discordant and strange to the way of their life. She got herself ready to face any surprises that might arise from the visit.





Twenty years after the dying down of wars which broke out here and there in many countries, many people, themselves included, discovered amid the possibilities of the destruction of civilization that the only thing left for man was his human character, to which he must cling, while having faith and love. Proceeding from this idea, everything had come to suggest to them the possibility of creating a special and unique state that would enable them to transcend all previous states, compromised by surrender to all the assumptions of old societies. So, they chose to live together, rejected all dubious contacts and bravely avowed this their life project. Some people attributed this bravery to the war, which brought people face to face with Fate and death.

Having made up their minds and got everything ready, they went into seclusion. There was no longer any reason for contacts after they had quit their jobs, to which they had devoted all their energies for many long years. They decided to relax. They settled on the outskirts of the town and not at its heart. By then, the town had been growing towards the achievement of promising projects and bringing its inhabitants nearer to the fulfilment of their daily demands in a fair and statesmanlike manner.

The seclusion inspired spiritual feelings in the couple, who grew to develop new senses which foretold whiffs of gun power and explosive as well as the possible blowing of wind and falling of rain. They came to know more about the misery of the remote world by virtue of their spiritual power, than if they were continuing to live amid the noise of the town. Mediation provided them with far-reaching outlooks, love provided them with joy, war provided them with awareness, hardships provided them with firmness, famines provided them with piety and losses provided them with content.

The ringing of the telephone kept buzzing in his ears, the echoes kept resounding in a broken manner and the voice of the friend took on sharp, curious and hostile tones.

"It must be the clocks and nothing else," she said.

"This would make me reconsider many matters relating to our life," he replied in firm tone.

"Having all the clocks become evil things?" she asked.

"It could be the clocks which tempt them to try to intrude upon our privacy," he said. "It seems that we are heading for a point where we should take a stance towards all this. The matter may demand a confrontation or a decision dictated by circumstances following the intrusion."

So, the bounds of their world became subject to intrusion and they became a target for the intrigues of others. They felt sure of one thing: the collision with the outside world was inevitable, whatever the case.

How strange. Why not refuse to see them in a decisive way? Did she want them to see the essential characteristic of their life? Had she come recently to feel the need for making contact with the outside world, and feared to reveal it, waiting for others to take the initiative? If so, was he capable of being deceived to such an extent? What remained of the world to make her desire it again?

"To put an end to these misgivings and queries that would certainly lead to introducing doubts, I will go out to town and leave you along with those friends coming from the past," he said to her.

"But it is not your usual time to go to town," she protested.

"It doesn't matter. I have something better to do than sitting with those friends, whom you know better than I do," he said.

She thought that he did not want to bother himself to sit with them so as to avert any trouble. She was however, sorry that he was going to leave her among these people, whom she regarded as strangers. Nothing remained to remind her of them.

His attitude aroused her suspicions about them, and something serious gave her a fright. She knew nothing about their present lives and had no idea of what had become of them. She wanted to see a person as he was and not as he had been. How could she talk to them while she was so estranged from all that was familiar to them and she had taken new and different attitudes towards all matters of life?

Now, he was going out, leaving her alone with the clocks, which began to strike fear into her as her relation to them changed from attachment to misgivings and hostility.

So, he would leave her alone facing the intrusion of the past into her paradise, for which she would be ready to sacrifice herself. Alone, she would face all the new wrinkles and lines on half forgotten faces. Alone, she would discover their sorrows and changes, if there were any, and all their losses. She would be the person least affected by time, she would have more sap of life in her body than the others. This had nothing to do with heredity but was due to her awareness of the necessity of extension in the future.

Those friends would see in her a woman who had withstood the passage of time and who had rebelled against its influence, though she was surrounded by clocks which would remind her every moment of the lapse of time.

Women, renowned for their curiosity, might wonder about the secret of her grace, despite her old age. She would tell them that she had rediscovered the faith in the great powers neglected by most people and in both faith and love, through which she had kept herself from damage and her body from senility.

Some might feel regret for being so busy with transient daily things and looking all the time for gain, which kept them away from the great things, from comprehending beauty and sanctifying life. She would torture them a little, surprise them, make them feel uneasy and disturb their souls, which had forgotten over the years the glory of faith and the secret of love.

This meeting with her might lead them to some desperate situation after it had become too late for them to act. It was very likely they would not forgive her for arousing their sorrows and regret and disclosing their heavy losses.

They had not yet come and he had not yet gone. Expectations and ideas were lying heavy on her mind, the clocks continued their siege. The house seemed narrow and the walls caving in on her. Suddenly, she saw him standing before her. He must have been standing there for a long time. She felt embarrassed when she sensed the warmth of his emotion towards her, glowing from under the mask of firmness to which he committed himself since they began talking. She felt assured of the strength of her love for him.

"I would like very much, my love, that you would not leave me alone with them," she said.

"From time to time, we should put our endurance to the test," he said gently.



"Do you want to test me?" she asked.

"Show them that you are unyielding to the call of the outside world" he said.

"But you want to prove this to you..Weil, as you like."

She thought that fear was behind his words, but there was no justification for it after the long time they had spent together.

She turned aside from him towards the passage of clocks, holding back her tears and the cry of protest that was about to slip from her. But she decided to pull herself together.

"If you want to be sure of my power of endurance, then, you should not leave, stay with me," she said.

After opening the door, he said, "Good bye, my darling, take care of yourself for my sake."

Her heart thumped. She loved him more than ever. All her fears vanished. She saw the spectacular sun glowing through the gaps between branches of trees. He seemed immersed in light, gay with life, despite all his years. She attributed his misgivings and heated argument to his constant care for the purity of their way of life, the example of self-sufficient lovers. When she closed the door, the clock in the corridor struck and seconds later, another clock struck. She wondered whether their fondness for life and its pleasures and facts could justify their interest in the measurement of time? Whether the old heavy losses had pushed them to this?

Whatever the reason, since they lived in this house they had attached such importance to every minute of time that they had grown fond of clocks. They got used to adding a new clock to their collection at every opportunity over the years. Here at the door, near the staircase, by the bed, on the tables, by mirrors, in the bathroom, on book shelves, you could see clocks working like living creatures, beating and asserting their presence around them. They were taking care of them all the time. These clocks kept their attention diverted from casual concerns breaking into their little paradise. They would ward off all evil by means of these clocks — or so it seemed to them. Clocks with various forms, future statues of creatures coming from unknown realms, glittering balls, illuminated geometric forms. One clock was made in the shape of a celestial galaxy with burning stars diffusing light and striking the hours. Strange figures without names, even the clocks operated by solar energy, clocks with the twelve signs of the Zodiac rotating around them. Transparent, speaking, illuminated clocks... clocks...clocks.

They were living on a small planet whose substance was time and in which they were rotating from sunrise to sunset and never departing from it. Their food was love. Can man be content with this? Can love keep its essence away from the vitality of the world? She was wondering.

"What we have made is enough for us," he said. Up to this moment, she had never felt any doubt what he said, only about the talent which this unique life granted her to preserve values sanctified by her. Once, she had fallen ill. She could remember how it happened. She had had a severe nervous fit.

Everything aroused her anxiety and emotions; all sounds, including the clocks ticking, music, footsteps of her husband and son in a house. He brought all the clocks to a stop and lined the whole house with sound-proof material and gave her the whole-hearted care of a lover and friend. When she was totally recovered, she said to him:

"What is the point of keeping all these clocks?"

"I am afraid you do not want me to repeat the answer which I have frequently given you," he answered. "My dear lady, in order not to overlook the movement of time, in order to live every moment and not miss any, and to keep in mind that it is slipping away and that the time to come is still ours."

She laughed as she found herself transcending time within love with him, she neither responding to the ticking of clocks nor he hearing it. All the clocks would fail to push them out of time, which stood still in their view. So, the beating of clocks was lost in the beating of the universe. The galaxy clock with its brilliant spark struck the date of that day: March, 13, 1998. So, she was now at the threshold of a new century: only two years to go and the world would open the file of the twenty-first century. The age was taking them to the end and time was taking them to the future. Mankind was pursuing its struggle, its love, its challenges or its surrender and rebellion while moving towards the future which would lead eventually to the point of death.

The house windows were open to the sun, while the waves of wind were passing in, carrying with them the scent of pollen and giant flowers open to reveal bright colours on stalks of tropical trees. Their greenery was glowing under the sun with their broad foliage looking like brilliant green sheets that the changes of weather could not affect. They were adapted to withstand snow, heat, wind and desert sand and grew to bear fruits throughout the year after they had undergone scores of tests.

The greenery of forests spread round houses to strike a balance between the city civilization and the nature, between the masses of cement and iron and the live green sap and the soft branches which could sense even the emotions of man and the sounds of creatures.

How rapidly the world changed! Only it would not change their love. All the city changed; methods of living were more modern, working hours were growing less and wages growing higher. The country successfully withstood many crises; the managements came to take an interest in the demands of people. Thus, a surplus of time and money arose. Prosperity prevailed and most people got engaged in the search for pastime and not pleasure for killing-time and not time-exploiting means. Nutritional science of the nineties was adopted to implementing programmes of education, treatment and building of human character. Other sciences were adapted less than before.

Sometimes, she would feel sorry for their previous lives during which they were deprived of all amenities. But her regret would soon change into pride for the sake of their son, now fifteen years old. He was chosen after having been prepared for a long time to have training, in one of the central laboratories, learning sculpture by means of radiation. She prided herself on him before his father, seeing in him an example capable of materializing all the hopes previously dashed. He was the son who knew no fear and had pride in his liberty to express what he thought, felt or desired, without hesitation. She always felt him fortunate, since he and his generation had got rid of all the shortcomings of the previous generations, which had grown up haphazardly. This distinction was a solace for parents and a source of happiness and achievement at the same time.



He used to ask her and his father, "Why should this happen to you?" He took exception to their renunciation of the world and saw it as something inappropriate to those loving people. While his father was urging him to produce an individual exploit through the achievement of something spectacular and infusing him with challenge and inculcating in him sparks of inspiration, his mother thought that her son was fit for mediation, inference and firm renovation more than for challenge and objected to the father's desire to teach him techniques of confrontation and defence.

In this respect, the father told her, "There are still springs of danger which have not dried up yet. There are many evils which are still besetting us. They could be far away from our land but they are present in any case. When these dangers invade us, the mediation of wise men and innovation of creators will be of no use in confronting them."

This was the only source of pessimism, it broke in on them from the outside, from places where they had no authority; dangers which were not only torturing them but also threatening civilization and people. So, this made her see in the distance some sort of darkness and covert things that were appearing and disappearing. These visions were striking at the wall of solitude, and going deep between its stones, exposing her to fears. But she would soon shake off these fears, restore her power of faith, cling to their way of life and rest assured.

However, they were not living in total solitude; they had a live channel of contact with the outside world in their son, who connected them with the world. Other means of contact had been abolished a long time ago. News was passing through him, it showed on his face and in his bearing. As changes were going on, he was growing up outside, among people and their ideals. They observed this every week when he came to them on his weekly leave, carrying with him the smell of the world, supplied with new energies enabling him to exchange emotions and opinions and to adapt himself to approval and rejection. His ears were filled with the talk of people, noise of machinery and singing of birds in the city parks. His eyes kept the cheerfulness of colours of life flowing along roads, rivers and heavens, in all that was dynamic.

As soon as he saw his parents, he would deliver himself of all the loads he was carrying: news, little festivities, secrets of the heart, his love for one of the girls working with him, his distinction in using new techniques in sculpture. Every time he came home, he brought some samples of the outside world: fruits newly developed by agronomists and put on the market, sheets of transparent plastics about the size of matches, storing oscillations which, with a touch, would turn into a cataract of music. He continued to infuse new blood into the house which was content with its solitude. His parents were receiving these things with caution and never seemed surprised by anything new, however much the outside world was preoccupied with it. The mother firmly rejected the boy's proposals to break the solitude.

"Mother, it would be more appropriate for education centres to take care of you than to take care of us. We do not make problematic things like those made by you. We have our own views but we respect even the ideas we disapprove of; is there any reason for fear? Why do you reject anything incompatible with your knowledge and methods?" said the son.

"Here is the difference. We were brought up in a different way and we cannot change our direction in relation to matters that have anything to do with our relation to others," the mother answered.

She imagined herself in one of the education centres about which her son talked and to which seven-year-old children were taken to be given tests. They were groomed according to their abilities. Those who were seen by scientists and experts as talented in taking command of groups were subjected to a special psychological and nutritional system. They were presented with conditioned foodstuffs that could enhance their physical ability, power of thinking and analysis, ways of taking initiative, firm will and well-controlled emotions. As for those seen as talented in art and literature, they were given foods containing bee-honey, embryos of wheat, oil of water-birds' livers and squash from passion flowers.

Her smile grew wider while setting her eyes on a point in the space, imagining herself reacting like some children refusing to have fixed amounts of food and staying away from school, eventually brought back home. Thus, they would be deprived, if they had talent, of the right to learn in modern laboratories.

In this case, they would be trained by their families in unskilled jobs such as drawing in oils, using a loom, sculpturing with a chisel, playing stringed instruments, as alternatives leading to satisfactory results. At the same time, drawing was done at laboratories according to scientific principles in physics, chemistry and mathematics, while sculpture was done by using pens releasing laser rays directed towards marble, stone, basalt and diorite in amounts deemed necessary by the sculptor.

The mother recovered from her reverie, assured that she had passed the age of belonging to these laboratories, but had, rather, adapted herself in a way that would lead to the protection of their joint life.

Soon, the friends would come and the people of the quarter would be surprised at seeing them breaking the usual seclusion, but those people would not think ill of them, as they were taking heed only of what was basic and really worth noting. She smelt something burning. She wondered, "Would people come to help us if a fire started in the house? Certainly, they would come, as nobody would be indifferent to a catastrophe taking place before their eyes. They would come to help, but without an excess of emotion. If so, why they have not bothered themselves about the hardships in many parts of the world, and why they have not got excited about anything? Have they become immune to feeling excessive emotions? Is this the reason why educated people are engaged in mediation and silence?"

Nothing around connected her with the outside world, no TV or radio. Many people disposed of them, and the use of TV in many cases was confined to supervision and broadcasting lectures in training centres, in observing processes of production and organizing the activities of the city people. Yes, this was necessary to get rid of noise, which had continued for a century. But, who made use of silence? Very few.

"He and I only take interest in what concerns us." The clocks made a loud noise and the atmosphere of the house went into confusion. One hour elapsed and the friends did not come.



They would come. Perhaps, they were delayed by a traffic jam. But had she told them where her house was? They must have known where it was. They were in the city and information was available to them while she only got scant information about what was around. Was this necessary? Was the seclusion useful? What was the point of going on with the seclusion in a house full of sounds of time? Ah, valuable time she meant to spend writing her diaries was lost, but, what diaries? Her days had become similar and equal, just like lines on white paper. Was she to write anything after this day?

She burst into tears. He had left her at home alone and gone to spend hours in the city. He had left her for nothing but an illusion, for assumptions which could be untrue. Why should she fear these friends? What was she to expect in the future after this seclusion? He had gone to have a walk in the city. He must have felt resentment against her friends. No, he need not have gone. She had tried to persuade him to stay and receive these people. Where was he now? Was he bored? Was he alone?

Did he think that there was some sort of connivance? A conspiracy? How horrible seclusion was! It could lead to illusions and fears, creating misgivings. But, why were they coming? Did they really want to see her? Or were there any covert motives? In any case, should she receive them warmly? For many years, nobody had knocked at her door. How anxious she was to hear their love stories and to know about the developments of their lives!

No, she did not want her own life to be open to the curiosity of those who had once been her friends. They had given their lives to work and they had the right to have rest in the way they chose. Were they mistaken? Never mind, this was no time to tell them so. They are happy; what were they afraid of? Did life become so fragile that a mere visit could affect it? She should welcome the friends but she should have prevented him from going away. But never mind; she might have the chance to set things right if he was to come home before they arrived.

Her son urged her to break her seclusion, while his father was urging him to accept the challenge.

"Mother, I will take you to where I have training. You will see my great stoneworks. You will be proud of me," he once told her.

"You can photograph your works and then I shall have a look at them," she said.

"All other mothers come there," he said bitterly.

"You are no longer a child and you can't make me do something I do not like," she said firmly.

"Mother, I am only requesting you to come; I have no right to force you," he said gently.

"It makes no difference. You can bring me photographs of your work. You know I have abstained from going to the city and I can't see any reason why I should change my decision."

He was shocked by her severity. Could severity turn this great mother into a solid wall? Had seclusion succeeded in changing the components of her soul? The young man looked upset. "Something must have happened," he said:

She was still standing by the window looking at the street. She was waiting anxiously for them to come. She felt an urge to break her seclusion. She must occupy herself with something.

Her curiosity was aroused by an old wardrobe in which she kept some souvenirs: events turned into things to keep. She opened the wardrobe, hoping to find something unique which had become valuable as an antique. She found letters which she held dear, poems written by him to her and souvenirs which they had brought with them from various countries they had visited. There was a paper bearing a saying by a Japanese monk, pine fruit from a tree in a Lebanese monastery, incense sticks from an Asiatic mosque and shells from the shore of a tropical island. There were many things reminding her of their travels to various parts of the world. Among them, she found several old sheets of paper crowded with words which she had written many years ago.

She read:

Hours

December, 31, 1978

One o'clock

My friend Amal has come to see me. I will try to remove stains of grief with the solution of joy, if you come too. I know this is impossible. The stains of sadness will remain on my wrist and ankle. The traces of my chains are indelible. I won't go to the realm of joy and freedom. I said to Amal "Replace the locks on the door of my house and give me time to sleep."

Five o'clock:

I think of using my blood in writing to you, seeking immortality with you. I am afraid that I will go into death after bleeding. Amal said, "You are really foolish."

Ten o'clock:

I am waiting for something to happen. I am dismantling the clock and eating it minute by minute, like a hungry beast of prey: Amal went out and left me alone. I wish to be among the people in their multitude.

Twelve o'clock:

A billion people are kissing each other. You do not come and I won't go to you. The year has fallen martyr amid the bullets of warriors, the starvation of the hungry and the joy and kisses of lovers. Some people have drunk toasts to the death of the year. The new night gave birth to a brilliant child. I took the child away to smuggle him out. They traced me: those who were drunk, curious and others. Their bullets chased me, seeking the child. When I came, side by side with the dawn, I deposited the child. I induced them to follow me. Then I managed to make them lose track of me.

Zero o'clock:

I am alone. Amal is sleeping in her warm house. I found a small stone. "No one can prevent me." I smashed my clock and ground it. I found pleasure in looking at the wreckage. When they overtook me.

She did not go on reading the papers. She went to the passage holding the clocks. She looked at her face in the mirror. It looked pale and her eyes were filled with sorrow. At that time, she used to ridicule her seclusion. How had it happened that she had chosen what she used to ridicule? It was eleven o'clock. The clocks began to strike. What was the point of knowing the time if nothing exceptional happened? The minutes looked like each other. What was the use of the clocks striking hours? Leisure time followed by leisure time... no man's voice to fill it up... no human pulsing through it... clocks: these forms arousing curiosity, these frameworks keeping their smallest details, inscriptions and colours.



Perhaps, they could not find where the house was? They might not come. What was the point of waiting for something that would not happen? The face of Amal was smiling among their faces. She must have grown up and withered a little.

Amal would show them the way. She did not know where the house was very well. She would be happy to see Amal. She would embrace her and shed tears. There would be a soft reproach. She could not stand the tinge of blame in human voices. The clocks struck. They had not knocked at the door yet. Her heart would feel faint when she saw them, Men and women alike. They would remind her very much of time... She would not be able to hold out. She would talk to them about him. She would be gentle with Amal, whom she loved. She would ask her to come again. No, this might not appeal to him. But he would respect her wish. He loved her more than others and better than others. He did not want to be rough. He loved her. How beautiful it would be if he would meet them.

"Amal, New Year's eve, smashing of my clocks. He had been unable to come and I could not stand my being alone, being mad. The world is not as bad as I might fear."

The clocks struck. They had surrounded her for years and she memorized their sounds. What had these noisy instruments given her? She returned to her room to put on a dress with gay colours, and to do her hair nicely. She would be a real hostess. For so long, she had not cared for such matters. He would be surprised by the change in her appearance. She unbuttoned her casual dress and removed the pins from her hair which was drawn back and let it fall loose over her shoulders. She took off the casual dress. The clocks struck once more. She was taken aback. Then, she moved awkwardly and leaned against the wardrobe. Another clock struck. She hurried barefooted towards the noisy clock, wrested it from its place and violently threw it against the ground. The clock shattered to pieces. Then, she put on a new dress, passed a soft brush through her hair and refreshed herself with weak perfume. Other clocks began to strike. She rejoiced at her rejuvenated face and smiled. The clocks went on striking. She hurried towards them, all of them, and hurled them without mercy at the solid ground. She continued destroying the clocks from various parts of the house, leaving them in heaps of ruin. Her delicate dress gave her stature the shape of poplar tree. Her soft fingers were like the branches of this slender tree.

The pulsing and noisy clocks finally ceased to tick and fell into silence when their springs broke, rolling on the ground.

The sound of a bird singing and the rustle of streets yielding to a strong wind came to her through the window. She felt her heart beating rapidly when a sound of footsteps in the passage came to her ears. Her heart beat more and more wildly when she heard the footsteps coming nearer. Out of the window, she saw faces, the nearest of which was Amal's face, faces tanned by sun and wind and invaded by wrinkles. As she heard his voice calling to her, she hastened to the door eagerly.



Translated by Adnan Salman



## Short Story

# The Angels' Morning

By A'id Khisbak

One Morning, boss Tareq appeared on his doorstep with quite a different look. He was full of life. His face shone like an angel's and in his hand he was holding a hose and watering the plants near his fence. It was the first time he had ever done so, and to say the least, the change was totally unexpected.

How on earth can a man change so drastically overnight? It all happened the very first day after he lost his job as head of the advertising department of the establishment where he had worked for years. Before leaving, he had shaken hands with the receptionist, offered him a cigarette and asked him to keep in touch. This behaviour had taken everybody by surprise and even made some question his real motives. Some considered it a manoeuvre, aimed at achieving personal gain. How else could anybody explain what had happened to him? Others believed that he was going through an exceptional experience and was disguising his old face behind this new look. No one could blame them.

It was a big step from that day when as head of his department to what he has now had. Now he had no power over even a single junior among his former subordinates. To whom could he give orders, day after day? His heyday was over, and this reality evoked mixed emotions in the hearts of those who knew him.

He had spent a long time paving the way to his high position. He would sit alone, think, draw up plans, add, omit and modify. He would be nice to his employees or hostile to those who were competing with him for the same seat, until he became head of the advertising department and started to exercise his powers.

Most of his neighbours who saw him the day after he had lost his job thought that he was on the verge of a breakdown. He was standing in front of his door, watering his plants and trees along the fence of his house. It was the first time they had ever seen him doing so. It had always been important to him that others did the menial work: he was careful not to appear

in public doing anything that would affect his status. He used to avoid public appearances, anyway. How many times he would have liked to see a good film, but he would not do it. Even if he had to go to a party, he would deliberately choose a place where his standing at work would follow him. Even when he smiled, he was a miser with his smiles.

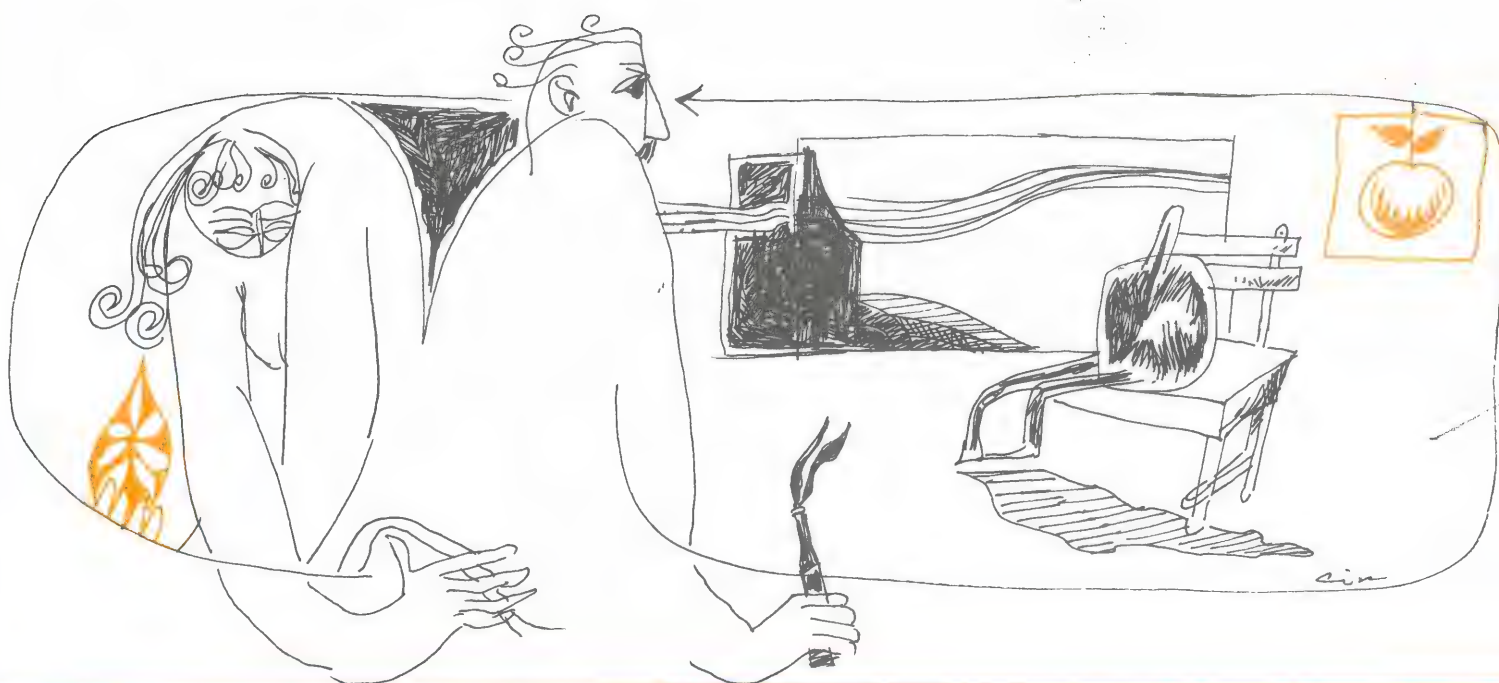
Those who had worked with him knew how determined he was not to use the public conveniences used by others. Occasionally, he would have to leave his office in a hurry, then after a while he would return, relaxed. Then the office workers would realize that he had gone home to relieve himself, as if he liked to put everything in its proper place.

So it was a big surprise for his neighbours to see him standing there watering the plants. Somebody commented: "Has the sun risen in the East this morning?" The unfamiliar sight made many people stop.

Tareq greeted them and wished them good morning. If the distance between him and the passing neighbour was too great for him to be heard, he would raise his free hand and wave to them ignoring the surprise on their faces.

At his department, all the employees well knew that he never answered "Good morning" in a neutral manner. He always arranged his arrival so that others would start the morning first. As soon as he arrived at office, he would go to his room, avoiding everybody. Therefore anyone who wanted to see him should be the first to greet him, and the way he used to answer the greeting would make that person understand his mood and reaction to be expected. If someone entered, carrying a few official papers, without seeing the boss's face, he would understand that he should immediately leave the room before the boss finished looking at the papers. Rarely, the face of the boss would show satisfaction and he would give a brief nod. That, of course, might only happen once a month, therefore the lucky employee who received such a blessing would feel distinguished among his colleagues for the rest of the day. The others would sit and review their past record and discuss with their mates mistakes which they had committed in the past and those yet to come.





When given an order, his underlings were worried to death about making a mistake. Boss Tareq wished them to fail. Therefore, many of them would hide troublesome papers or postpone a certain task. But Tareq was not the kind of person to forget such things. He would phone the man concerned and tell him:

"You may come and see me in 15 minutes." The trial had started. Otherwise, he would have said, "Come and see me now." Fifteen minutes would pass while the man's mind would pass over thousands of things which could indict him. When finally he entered the office, the boss would keep him standing while he looked through the papers two or three times before saying: "Nothing, you can go now. I don't want to keep you away from the rest of your work."

The man would leave the room unrelieved. Seeing the club waved in his face was more painful than being hit by it.

Many of his neighbours had seen him only as he left home in the mornings or coming back. He was always looking ahead, unwilling to look in anybody's face. His long stay on the doorstep this morning allowed them to see him well. They found him an ordinary human being with no exceptional characteristics, after dropping all the extras that he was accustomed to, and the ambiguity in which he had wrapped himself. If one of his former employees had seen him with this exceptional appearance, he would have explained it in the light of his past experience. He would have thought that if the boss had had the opportunity, he might have behaved in a way that would endear him to others, even if it had meant using the same lavatory as other employees. But not now. How could he enter an office that did not belong to him any more?

In time, the office workers will forget the sound of his foot steps in the corridors on the way to his office every morning. Once he had entered the room and closed the door they would expect to be summoned at any moment. He would keep them waiting. He knew this would keep them on the alert as long as he was there. For them his door was not an ordinary door that could be opened at any time. Those who worked with him

from the beginning remembered very well that at first he used to put his desk near the door. As soon as the door opened, one would encounter, at close range, the eyes or the boss. He was careful to keep the wide curtain on the opposite side open.

Later, when his department expanded he moved his desk to be in front of the window. With the new set-up he insisted that the curtain should remain drawn to prevent daylight from coming in. He invented things not thought of before and they became part of the place. He ordered strong lighting near the entrance from inside. This would make the caller stand in the middle of a light beam directed from the ceiling, which would make him feel he was under inspection. His way of entering the room, his emotions and gestures could all be examined in the spotlight.

On his desk the boss kept a table lamp. The distance between the spotlight and the desk did not exceed four metres, but it seemed to be the longest distance ever between two points. The caller's thoughts would stray even those concerned with the job. That gap between the two points would suck everything out of his mind and leave it as empty as a drum.

The boss would not allow more than one person at a time to enter his office. In his office one would feel lonely, with no one else to lean on or to help him arrange what was on his mind.

All those who saw the boss on this particular morning on his doorstep, and who greeted him on their way to work, were astonished to see him still standing in the same place when they came home that afternoon. They had to tread carefully. By then, water was running in the street, making it impossible to walk by without one's shoes becoming very wet. Those who were driving felt it impolite not to reduce speed, to avoid splashing water over the boss's trousers, still folded up to above his knees.

The boss would notice that. It was nice to see people slowing down, approaching him. He would raise his free hand to wave to them. He would wish them good-day in an exhausted voice while he still held the hose and watered the plants.

Translated by Hadi Al-Tajer



## Short Story

# Autumn Vision



Autumn came that year with a vision different from those of previous years--- visions of the river bank: the "chopped head," the "idle clocks of squares," the "island of statues", the "hanging flies", a series of visions moistened with the dew of dawn.

All faces in that autumn's vision were covered in mist and alarm except for one which expressed motherhood and safety. A crowd of people, carrying luggage, were rushing away from the bridge or the ferryboat that came from the other side of the river. As soon as they arrived at the jetty, they dispersed in all directions leaving behind one old woman, walking as slow as a turtle.

Lights are thrown on the old face coming out of the mist. It is the old woman. Other details are the waves of the river, the boats, the wooden poles of an old bridge and a strand of iron wires, the end of which are dangling in water. Not so clear, next comes a squadron of planes or a cloud. Hours later, the crowd reappears, and the old face emerges from nowhere, a river turtle on the jetty where ferryboats land.

I went out before sunset to the site of the new vision. Silence held the ships on the disturbed surface of water. Sudden breezes blew out of that silence, stirred the wilted yellow leaves and rustled between feet.

I arrived at the ferryboats that transport passengers from this bank to the opposite side. It was the same place: the wooden poles of an old bridge, the strand of iron wires, a wrecked ship rotten by waves, some boats and a bench on the bank, near the river's edge. I waited, but nothing happened.

The last ferryboat coming from the far side stopped and few passengers got off. Darkness fell and the huge trees along the bank were blackened; lights fell on the scattered ships. The bridge of the ferryboat was empty.

The repeated appearance of the vision brought a clearer image of the old woman similar to that of stubborn grandmother, the midwife of hundreds of newborn children, or of a granny turtle with its slow and staggering movement, and smooth dark green face. After forty days the face was the same.

On that day in the spring of 1941, when the British ships landed Gurkha soldiers to occupy al-Ashar in Basra, my folk sent me with my nurse to my relatives in Nahar Khoz village near Abu-al-Khasib. The nurse put me up in a mud house. As we had arrived at night, I did not realise how big the house was until the next morning. There were five rooms in it with a long fence surrounding and separating it from the adjacent river and the house stood there amid date-palms. To my surprise I discovered that I was not alone in the house. In addition to two old men living in one of the rooms, there were ten children from the orphanage. These orphans were handed over by the security men to the nurse after the resistance against the occupation forces had intensified; employees and the police had retreated from the city, and disorder had spread as houses were looted.

That morning the nurse called us for breakfast. We sat on the ground around a low table. I looked from above the edge of the cup at the calm faces of the boys who were engaged in sipping milk. They were brown, slim and the oldest one was no more than ten.

After breakfast we went out to the river through one of the three gates that led to stone steps. The end of the steps was covered with river water and overshadowed by thick trees along both banks. The river was not very wide but its limpid waters deceived us, for we were unaware of its real depth.

In the evening, we sat again around the low table. The nurse, behind us, distributed among us hot soup and fresh



bread. We drank water from earthenware beakers. Then we heard someone say: "It's a turtle". That morning, we had seen more than one real turtle coming out of the river.

When the old woman sat at the head of the table, the faint light of the lamp lit her green face. She was staring at us with her little eyes. She looked like a deeply-rooted tree. Her peaceful turtle face concealed her old age and the hardships of her life up to the time when she got out on the bank of this autumn's vision. She never changed.

I went back to the apartment late in the evening. None of my friends was there yet. I looked through the window overlooking the bus station. I watched the disordered movements of those who were going back home. The people were getting on buses very slowly. The bus shelters were left empty, just like lonely hats, over platforms.

There was not much furniture in the room. The important thing in the room was a long low table. I sat at the end of it and drew a sketch of Granny Turtle. Then I finished some other sketches and heard my friends' footsteps coming towards the room. There were only three who came every night. They examined the sketches and wondered if they knew who she was. I said, "One of you must know who she is". Then I added, "We used to call her Granny Turtle. That was years ago."

Later, others arrived. They were gay and noisy. One of them asked me, "Guess who said 'It is your battle against the ghost of friendship.'"

Victor Hugo", I said.

"James Joyce".

Every night we ten gathered. We sat on the ground round the low table. I went to the other room and took their favourite wine from the fridge. I put it on the table before my friends and said, "It's a surprise, you'll drink tonight in earthenware beakers". I had bought a set of them in brown ceramic. We lifted the beakers and one of the friends said, "A toast to mud". Then I lifted my glass and said, "A toast to the wandering turtle". They sipped the wine quickly. I watched them over the edge of my glass. They had grown old, and for the first time I noticed the early furrows on their faces. They became quieter. I went to the window and looked at the square. There were only a few people at the bus stop. The last bus was about to depart.

One of the friends said, "Homelands are the frame of strong friendships." They all got drunk. Hands holding beakers or cigarettes slowed down. They looked like ghosts filled with faithfulness in the way they sat around the table. Their shadows were mingling on the walls and they were close to each other as a long time ago.

The fan was moving, so their breath and cigarette smoke were vanishing. The buzzing of the fan was mixed with the low tones of their last words. The night passed and I must have fallen asleep because I found no one in the room when I woke up. The beakers were overturned on the table near the empty bottles. Between them lay the face of Granny Turtle, covered with a pink stain.

At dawn I left the room and hurried to the ferryboat jetty. I felt the moist breeze of the river as I came closer. At the same place, there was a pontoon bridge to the other bank. A convoy of big military trucks was crossing the bridge towards the eastern bank of the river. It was a long convoy loaded with soldiers and weapons.

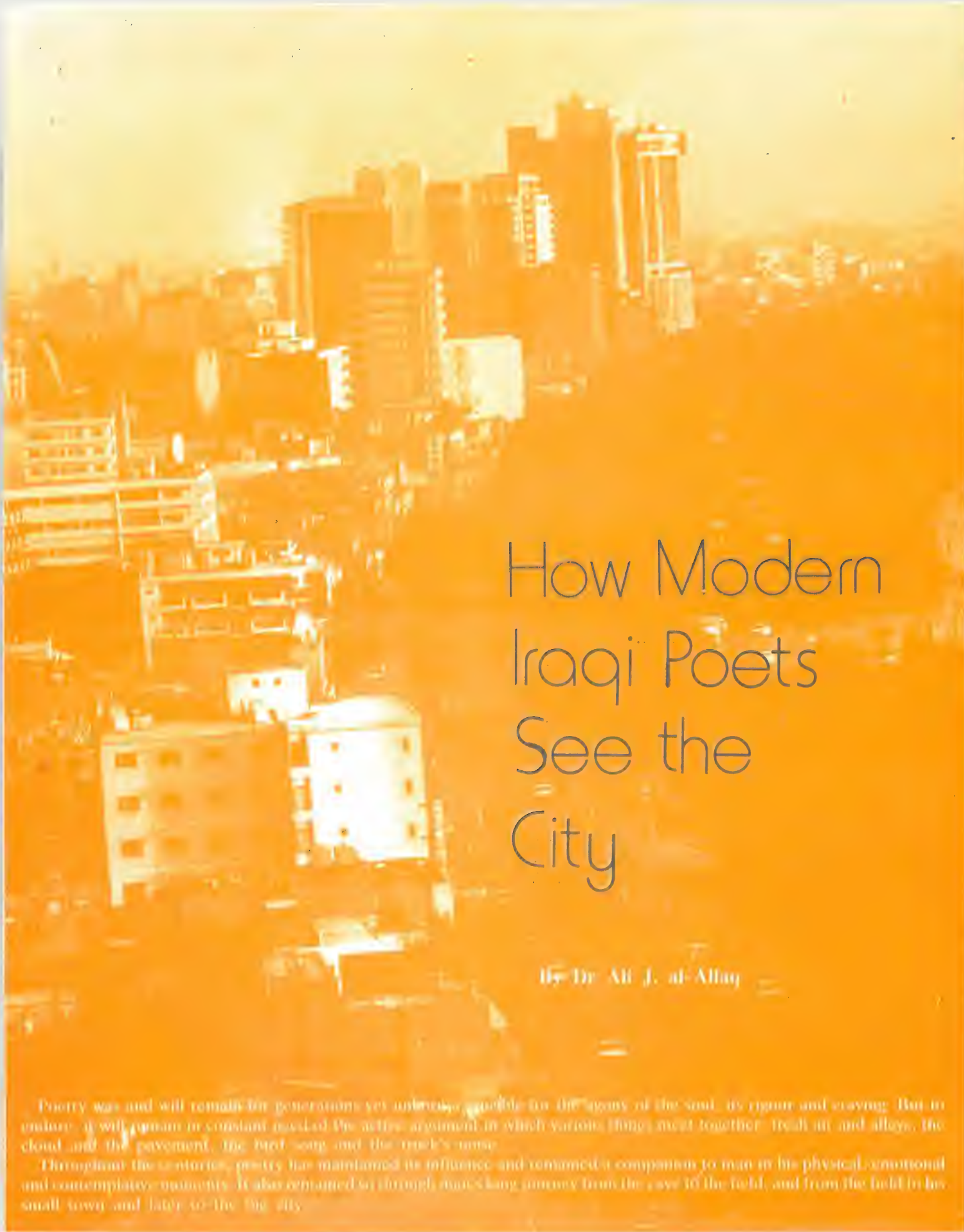
The day over, I went back to the same place. The pontoon bridge was still there and the convoy of trucks continued to cross it. None of the friends came to the apartment that night or the following night, because war had already started.

By Mohammed Khudhayir



Translated by Yania S. Atallah



An aerial photograph of a city skyline, likely Baghdad, Iraq, with a monochromatic orange tint. The image shows a dense urban landscape with numerous buildings of varying heights and architectural styles. The sky is a pale, hazy orange, and the overall atmosphere is one of a vast, sprawling metropolis.

# How Modern Iraqi Poets See the City

By Dr. Ali J. al-Ali

Poetry was and will remain for generations yet unborn a guide to the agony of the soul, its rigour and craving. But in addition, it will remain in constant motion the active argument in which various things meet together: flesh and alley, the cloud and the pavement, the bird song and the truck's rumble.

Throughout the centuries, poetry has maintained its influence and remained a companion to man in his physical, emotional and contemplative moments. It also remained so through man's long journey from the cave to the field, and from the field to his small town and later to the big city.



Within that context, poetry was an instrument used to express man's relations to his own reality, in time and place.

When the city gradually became a human focal point, drawing man's attention away from its wilderness and open space, its glamour and its evil were very tempting and, with the passage of time, irresistible. Hence, poetry began to absorb the city life. Poetry was, however, not completely isolated from the countryside since cities had not yet developed the characteristics which would make them self-sufficient and enclosed entities. If, for example, we think of the history of the cities in Mesopotamia, we shall not find any antagonistic attitude towards the city. Neither do we see hostility between city-dwellers and those who lived in the countryside. In the Middle Ages, the city developed a special splendour, since it stood for order, beauty and divine security.

Poetry began to adopt a satirical attitude towards the city only during recent times. Meanwhile, the city itself, especially in Europe and America, had developed an antagonistic stand towards man in general as a result of the introduction of the machine and subsequent technology. This has made the poet, in turn, feel antagonism towards the city.

We can say that poetry has reflected its relation to the city in two main forms: satire and submission. And as Andrea Noshi has said, there are those who sing songs of celebration and those who expose its evil deeds and portray it in all its horrors.

If Baudelaire, described by Frank Kermode as one of the greatest poets of the modern city, portrayed the dirt and loneliness of the city, Walt Whitman, on the other hand, took a completely different stand. He trusted it, celebrated its workers, alleys, brothels and tired sailors. He also sang for its whores, sellers and stifling crowds. In fact, he was a modern voice, satisfied and singing for the sprawling city which soared to the heights, summarizing the whole world.

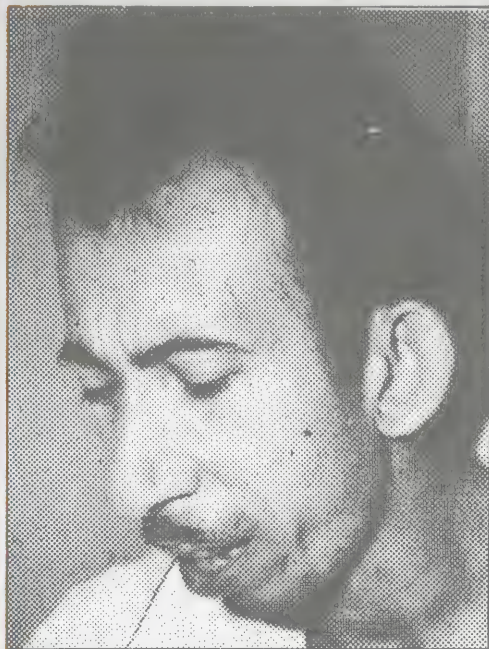
The contemporary image of the European city has, in Eliot for instance, become entirely ugly: it is a city very clearly reflecting the staccato abruptness of human relationships. *The Waste Land* was not simply a description of a Western city. It was rather an expression of the post-war defeat and image of Europe. In it, as well as in many other poems by Eliot, the

"disgusting monotony of city life" is very clear. Eliot, in fact, was not interested in portraying the city in its dominant physical presence as much as he was interested in expressing a thoroughly poetical vision of what is beyond this presence, like the psychological destruction and moral ruin which he attributed to the loss of spiritual faith among Europeans. Eliot was rightly the poet of modern man in his agony and torture. And in his poems, the agony of a generation battered by the city and crushed by a disturbed and cruel life style is quite clear.

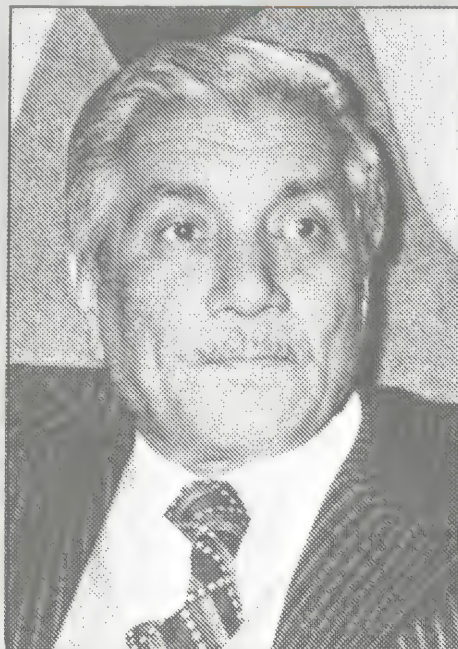
After World War II, the wind of radical change started to blow through the Arab world, and, probably for the first time, it found itself face to face with an unfamiliar world, new and strict. And the Arab poet found new roads open to him, which made available various possibilities enabling him to express his new attitude towards the world.

The liberation from the mono-rhyme was not the only achievement of the modern poem. Turning towards the foot of the poem as a musical unit was also not a feat. On their own, they do not mean a big issue in the development of Arabic poetry and its modernism. Plenty of poetry has been and is still being written without rigid commitment to the rhythm or rhyme. To think of it as poetry is to overestimate its value and to neglect the recognized criteria. The real achievement of the Arabic poem, which is now agreed upon, is the poet's new look and attitude towards his reality and his relation with the world. In other words, it is in his awareness of time and place that most of the poetry distanced itself from life and its bustling aspects. The modern poet's concern with society, in general, and the city community, in particular, is one distinguished aspect of this new look. The significance of the city did not stem from the fact that it was a framework of the place in which society bustles with life and continually develops its values and patterns of life. Rather, it was the essence of this bustle and development on one hand, and a result of all that on the other hand.

The modern Arab poet did not take up an antagonistic attitude towards the city as did Eliot, for example. Truly, some Arab poets wrote poems in which they satirized the city,



Badr Shakir al-Sayyab



Abdul Wahab al-Bayati



Hamid Sa'id



or took a suspicious look at it. Yet, none of those poems fits with other poems to make a cultural framework of an antagonistic attitude towards the city.

Lebanese Poet Adonis (Ali Ahmed Sa'id) is probably the only exception in this regard. An antagonistic attitude towards the Arab city was not a genuine one since it lacked its philosophical and ideological justification and was not based on a realistic ground, i.e., on the realities of the Arab city and the size of its development in comparison with the modern cities of the world.

In his article "The Poet and the City" Auden enumerates four features of the present-day world:

1. Loss of faith in the immortality of the physical world;
2. loss of faith in the realities of perception and its significance;
3. loss of faith in any rule or principle that governs human nature;
4. loss of man whom the world can make a man of action and performer of good deeds.

Naturally, these features do not only represent the European poet's attitude towards the city, but also his vision of the whole world. Therefore, they are features with philosophical and ideological weight which deserve to add a certain depth of his thought and attitude. The artist of the modern city has lost the sense of what he is doing because of the introduction of the machine.

The pleasure of marking something and having a sense of creativity are lost in the European life which science and technology between them have turned into a ready-made life style, that has lost its spontaneity. The machine has, in fact, destroyed the direct relationship between man's will and his action. In this context, the European poet's philosophical attitude towards life and the whole world crystallized and helped in defining the sort of city life which became part of a comprehensive and complicated life.

Did the Arab poet have a philosophical ground similar to that of his European counterpart? And would such a ground be the basis of a coherent and developed attitude towards the city? And does the Arab city, including its human relationships and developed areas, represent alienation facing the Arab poet and pressing hard on his soul and conscious?

Undoubtedly, Eliot was largely responsible for the spread of satire upon the city in Arabic poetry. However, it is not the only reason for that. Grumbling about the city was, to a large extent, a socio-political reaction to what the city implies. And it is also true to say that part of the hopelessness and grumbling some Arab poets feel about the city lack originality. It is similar to what Douglas Bush is describing when he says: "Admiring hopelessness is the latest fashion". He also asks us to distinguish this from "real pessimism" in modern poetry. The Arab poet's depression about the city seems, mostly, an aspect of nostalgia for Nature. It also represents a deep-rooted Romantic trend from which the poet can't easily liberate himself. Therefore, the countryside to such a poet is the opposite of the city, more innocent and more splendid. And, in as much as the city remains confined to the present, the countryside is open to the past, childhood and dreaming. The Arab poet's inclination towards the countryside is another aspect of his attitude towards the city. However, its sentimentalism taken together with the backwardness of the Arab city made it difficult for such an attitude to develop into a comprehensive philosophical stand. That

simply means that nostalgia for nature was not part of a broader philosophical concept of the city, life and the whole world.

With Iraqi pioneer poet Badr Shakir al-Sayyab, such nostalgia is connected to an attitude towards the city, which other psychological and political factors helped to form. Al-Sayyab's nostalgia was a genuine one and open to the future. It was also not confined to any period of his emotional and cultural development. On the contrary, the older he grew, the more he became alienated from the city and the nature of its life, and the more he longed to go back to the countryside, Nature and open spaces. Al-Sayyab was always obsessed, in many of his poems with splendid village paradises — substitutes for the city's harmful indifference towards him. *Jaykour* and *Bouwaib*, al-Sayyab's two legends, were a mark of innocence and compassion, making him forget for a brief time the city's gloom and depression. Therefore, no city could take al-Sayyab from his sweet village paradises. Undoubtedly, the poet's illness played a large part in deepening this genuine feeling and always made him tense and anxious. This illness was probably responsible for depriving Arabic poetry of a highly gifted poet. The years of his mature poetry, just before his health declined, were the most influential period in the development of modern Arabic poetry. Once his condition worsened, we started to miss his wild imagination and his real feeling. Al-Sayyab, however, saw himself in the later years of his life as dead rather than alive. Many of his later poems expressed such a feeling:

*The funeral lifts the ruined land  
From its head, looks at the walls,  
The ceiling, the mirror and the bottles.*

It seems that this sense was behind *Um al-Buroum*, one of al-Sayyab's most important poems which expressed the poet's discontent with the city and his melancholic anger because the graveyard had become "part of the city".

*But I did not see the dead the gravedigger expels  
From the old graves and takes off their shrouds or covers them*

*But I did not see the dead before your sand  
Made clear by a city's impudence, a dancer's song and a wine merchant*

The poem pathetically laments the dead over whose eternal resting-place the city has crept. Al-Sayyab speaks as if he saw himself a victim of the sprawling city. He felt that he was personally wronged, since he was not talking about the silent dead or the quiet graveyard.

The poem speaks of their feelings, complaints and dreams. That is quite natural, since al-Sayyab probably saw the dead as friends and companions on the same journey, whom he will shortly join. *Um al-Buroum*, in fact, reflects al-Sayyab's love and support for the dead. He loved them because his fate was to be among them and his support for them was because he belonged to them. The city has done a lot of harm to him and his presence while he is still roaming its streets. Now it has done yet further harm while he is dead or almost dead:

*The birds used, at early dawn, to come  
Fall like fruits on the graves, peck the silence  
And the dead dream  
Of the light giggle and of the hill swept by the light.*

The poem's end is submissive, tolerant and sympathetic as it embraces al-Sayyab's friends who book a bed of dust among them in their long sleep and insomnia which:



*Longs for the Doomsday and counts the wheels on the road  
And waits for God's appointment.*

Why does al-Sayyab here defend the dwellers of the mortal graveyard? Undoubtedly, this is closely related to his romantic mood which sees in the city indifference to man which culminates in indifference to the dead and death itself. Al-Sayyab has seen in the city's encroachment on the graveyard as a violation of the splendour of death, its mysteries and enormity. Thus, death in al-Sayyab's city encounters death in other cities of the world through this vivid image; death which became a passing incident detached from the "horrific and holy image the passing generations have drawn, since it appears here in a disgusting and vulgar way." When the city does not pay attention to the death of man, it ceases to pay attention to his pleasure as well. This means that man's special characteristics of happiness and sadness do not change the rhythm of the Western city. So, if death has lost its horrific image, the *Id* itself has lost in the new city its immortality and spontaneity.

Talking about al-Sayyab's stand towards the city should not make us forget the political factor which, together with his romantic mood and ill-health, helped in defining this attitude. The political situation in Iraq, during the life of al-Sayyab, was in upheaval and naturally the city was the stage on which political tension was enacted. So when al-Sayyab says in *Jaykour and the City*:

*Around me the city roads  
Are ropes of mud chewing my heart  
And giving out of an ember, its clay  
Ropes of fire whipping the sad and naked fields  
And burn Jaykour at the bottom of my soul  
And in it plant the ashes of hatred.*

He gives us a number of vocabulary items — codes which help in understanding the text and analysing its historical, political and psychological relations which reflect, according to him, a meaningful stand towards the city. Words like *taltaf* (to wind), *duroub* (roads) *hibal* (ropes) *yajlud* (to whip) and *daghina* (hatred) are not used in this context for themselves. In fact, their implication stirs the memory and throws light on the hard times al-Sayyab witnessed once and whose victim he became on the other.

However, and in spite of his catastrophic vision, al-Sayyab saw that the city's future rises from blood and ashes, clear and fertile. The state of emergency could close his eyes to what was going beyond. He also saw that the city's future sprang from the ruin he observed and that the wounds, pain and rubble conceal underneath a new birth:

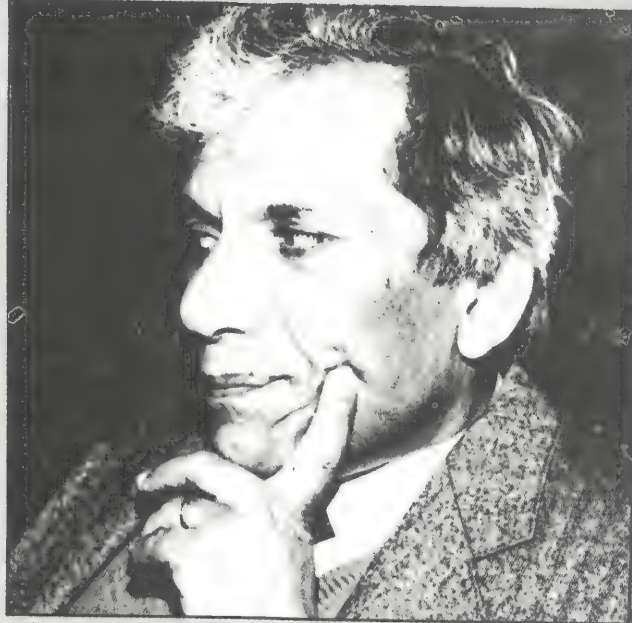
*After they had nailed me and cast my eyes to the city  
I could hardly know the plain, wall and graveyard.  
Everything was, as far as the eye can see,  
Like a blooming forest  
In every corner, there was a cross and a sad mother  
Holy is God  
This is the city's labour.*

Al-Sayyab's city was not isolated from the political transformations and events which loaded the poet's memory with many symbols from the past and which conveyed some of its implications.

If the city was thus reflected in al-Sayyab, it has taken, then, a completely different form in poets like Abdul Wahab al-Bayati and Buland al-Haydari. In al-Bayati, for example,



Hasab al-Sheikh Ja'far



Abdul Razzaq Abdul Wahid

language is the clearest element of the city which played a major role in shaping the poet's language, word and syntax. Probably no achievement of al-Bayati matched the daily sense which distinguished his language and gave it a great deal of its warmth and intimacy.

His language was the language of the city in the 1950s. In many cases, it was direct, clear and spontaneous, but at the same time it lacked coherence and charm. The structure of the poem included many of the city's characteristics when its quarters were haphazardly dispersed and, architecturally speaking, had no harmony. Al-Bayati's poetry appeared, in general, as a reflection of the city being torn apart. To substitute the rigid construction and development, the city, and this is a feature of al-Bayati's poetry at that time, was a closely-related community knit together by deep emotional feeling. Emotions as such, and not the gleaming building, offered the city its entity and coherence. Besides, it was emotion that offered al-Bayati's poetry its ardour and appeal.

The effect of the city is not confined to al-Bayati's language and the structure of his poetry. It also includes the tone of most of his poetry. Any researcher would not be shy of saying



that the satire that dominates his poetry in the 1950s was mostly related to the city. It came from the ridicule and jokes of city people, especially those who live in popular areas. This ridicule is quite different from the ridicule of the countryman, in that the latter is less harmful and more intimate.

The city in the poetry of al-Bayati is often quite a common one. The poet's long journey among various cities of the world seems to have prevented him from having deep in his mind a well-defined Iraqi city. In his poem *al-Madina* (The City) the poet says:

*When the city became naked  
I saw in its sad eyes  
The obscenity of its politicians, thieves and pawns  
In its eyes I saw the gallows set up,  
The jails and the focus,  
The smoke, sadness and loss.  
In its eyes I saw the man  
Stuck like post stamps  
To everything.*

So the poet does not seem to mean any specific city. He means all cities to which these qualities or some of them might apply.

Later on, al-Bayati tried to assert a special presence of what might be termed as the total city, a city which exists in the context of a definite time and place and which, however, encounters or interacts with other cities in order to become a more comprehensive one. Such a city might even rebel against the limit of time and place and the limit of sadness and happiness in a fresh and free vision in which contradictions are mixed and a terrible and astonishing dialogue ensues:

*The cities, conquered and defeated  
Babylon, Rome, Nineveh and Thebes  
God and Devil  
Inheritor of this world — a man  
Circling around the wall, naked  
Forbidden fruits.  
And cities without spring — dark  
Open and submissive.*

Al-Bayati hardly specifies a city to build his own conclusive symbol. He often satisfies himself with passing by the cities-symbols without stopping at them. Babylon, however, is almost a rare exception. The poet used it in his long poem *What comes, What Never Comes* and it became a multi-dimensional symbol reflecting a state the Arab world had passed after the Arab-Israeli war of June 6, 1967. In his poem, Babylon was an equivalent to the city-symbol which bore, at that time, the worries of Arab people, their hopelessness and longing for a better situation:

*Babylon under the foot of time  
Waiting for the resurrection. So stand up  
Astarte, and fill up the jars  
And wet the lips of this wounded lion  
And wait with the wolves and the wailing wind  
And bring down the rain  
On this gloomy waste.*

Thus, Babylon was, in the poetry of al-Bayati, a symbol for man's worries and pain. To the Iraqi poet of the 1960s and

after, the city became an equivalent to his socio-political tendencies and his national and popular identity. Like many other Arab cities, the Iraqi city played a decisive role in the national struggle and suffered a great deal of constraint and foreign domination. Therefore, the Iraqi city became rich in implications. It was essentially a developing city rising in the pale open space and was expected to become a nucleus of a society more advanced, and a fresh start in life that would meet the winds of change.

Moreover, the city, according to the Iraqi poet, was the source of his relation with the culture of his time and its changes. Undoubtedly, it played a role similar to the one played by the European city in modernizing literature and arts. Understandably, the birth of modern literature was connected with Baudelaire in particular. Modernity in the city "went along with modernity in poetry" The Iraqi poet was, like the rest of the Arab poets, the foster-son of the city if not a true son in this regard.

When we talk about the cultural standard of the Iraqi or Arab city, we should bear in mind that in spite of its enormity, it preserves good relations with the village and that the borders are not clearly defined between the city and the village in some Arab cities. The Iraqi and Arab cities have not yet turned gloomy or inhumane. For, in spite of its development, the city still preserves moral values and social conventions of genuine countryside roots. It will remain, as it seems to me, and for a long period of time, warm, human and coherent. At least, it does not appear to morally contradict the countryside. Therefore, the parallel between the pastoral legends and the urban evil does not comply with the spiritual reality of this developing city which we are still spiritually related to, though in varying degrees.

Has the Iraqi or Arab city managed to create its own poet? The answer to this question has something to do with the technical and cultural standards of such a city, standards still not very clearly defined. In the Arab world, in general, we try to make the city acquire a great deal of this development. The presence of a poet, intimately bound to the city, living its problems and faithfully expressing details of its everyday life, must be achieved one day. This will happen only when the Arab city arrives at a high cultural standard and when technology is introduced to every single aspect of life to play its role in the pattern of behaviour and ways of thought and perception. With such a thing, we shall have our own cities that reflect the mode of time, its morals and concerns. Those cities will then certainly find their own poets who will express the tempo of life, and who will celebrate these poets as symbols with various connotations.

Our Arab cities have not managed to create poets in the sense that a European city has done. The Arab city has not yet become a pressure point or a physical or moral entity that lodges in the conscience of the Arab poet. Also, the Arab city still lacks that complicated tempo of life and the mysterious enormity which characterizes the big cities of the world. Truly, the Arab city has come a considerable distance on the way to contemporary life, but surely not enough to make it a subject for satire. After all, the Arab city started to find its own way in the poems of Iraqi poets not as a dream or symbol, but as something with a thriving life of its own which tried to achieve a standard of civilization and modernity similar to that of other world cities. In this attempt, the city opened itself to the Iraqi poet in various and unknown ways and he had to learn to deal



with the city and express the subjects it evoked. Naturally, the poet of a city does not have to mention the name of that city too much in his poems. What the poet has to convey is the spirit of the city, the tempo of its life and the relationships among its people. Therefore, poetry does not concern itself with introducing only the image of a changing world. What it always presents is, in fact, the inner and spiritual life of this world. In this sense, and without ignoring the wide gulf between the European city and the Arab or Iraqi city, Sami Mehdi and Yassin T. Hafidh both represent distinguished examples of city poets in their relations to its cultural, social and psychological aspects.

Contemporary life lacks deep-rooted relations among the people. And in order to resist the stresses of modern life, an artist has to go back to his inner self, free all his mental and conceptual forces, reflect on the world and enjoy the excitement and novelty of things. That might help the poet survive "in the sweeping current of decline which surrounds every corner." That is the poet's astonishing privilege which makes him transcend the limitations of the physical world and secure his real existence in the "declining kingdom" among its moral inhabitants.

Lack of such relations is an important part of Sami Mehdi's sense of the city and the impact of time on it. City life, accordingly, establishes a new world instead of the one the poet once loved. It also substitutes old relations, including love and intimacy, with new ones that lack this same love and intimacy. Therefore, Sami Mehdi sees that this age is a "declining age" to which the city does not give "the old sense of intimacy only very little (of which) remains in his memory" Modern blocks of houses in modern cities have lost the characteristics of old houses namely "familiar and constant voices, colours, smells and movement." Also the nature of relations among people in modern districts has taken another form. The quarter has now become packed with strangers, "some even do not know their neighbour" whereas, in the past it was full of "relatives, neighbours, friends and acquaintances"

Mehdi starts his poem *Al-Zawal* (Decline) on a tragic note. He calls out to "stop the world" for there is a shock that destroys the familiar image of the world and its stability:

*Stop the world  
Things are shaking  
And moving without delay.  
And cities pass,  
Places, people, structures, thoughts  
Around me.*

The poet thinks it is no longer possible to comprehend the movement of the world or even follow it. It is so fast that it does not only remove the shape of the city but also people, thoughts and cities. And in order to make this fast process of declining and transformation appear in a magnificent way, the poet has chosen the Arabic "*al-Wafir*" metre for his poem; a metre distinguished by "fast movement" The omission of Arabic conjunctions from the last line gives a double sense of speed:

*And  
I  
Can't  
Catch*

*Anything  
Of it  
Anything*

The writing of words in this scattered way reflects the poet's inability to catch any scattered part of the world, which is heading toward a decline and which, in turn, brings the poet to the climax of his sense of solitude and negligence. When the world of the city escapes, when relations pass for ever and when everyone becomes engaged in his own world, the poet then has only to remain alone.

The sense of solitude in the crowded city, which the poet always faces, and the poet's sense of loneliness do not arise only from the loss of intimate friends, but also from the structure of the city which the poet sees as changed and which can no longer help in the establishment and renewal of good relations. The poet's poem *Qifa Nabki* (Let's Stand and Cry) begins with:

*And I remember we had names  
And we knew fathers and sons  
And every house  
Every corner of a house  
And every story ever told  
About the dead and the living*

This beginning reveals, as it is the case with the rest of the poem, a tragic sense of the past and a longing for its warm, simple and clear aspects. Transformations of the city have lost the poet the old relations and neighbourhood of the past. Now he is on his own, facing everything: His life and death included:

*My house is no longer mine  
My neighbour is no longer mine  
My address has changed  
I have no address  
Alone I came back  
Alone I walked  
Alone I died.*

In this way, the poet's sense of loneliness becomes more tense and complicated. He also faces the most difficult situation when he realizes that to be in contact with others implies a solitude, and to attempt to mix with others is an assertion of his own alienation. His poem *al-Asha' al-Akhir* (The Last Supper) expresses, as is the case with Yassin T. Hafidh's *al-Thuyouf* (The Guests), this problem although each poet has his own distinguished poetical approach. Hafidh tends, for example, to pick even the minute detail whereas Mehdi tends to avoid the details and figures of speech. Both poems express the poets' sense of alienation when surrounded by others. And although it is not necessary that any of these two poems describe an actual meeting, they both express the poet's bitter disappointment in his attempt to make contact with others. The poem begins with preparations to receive the guests:

*It was a superb supper  
In it the most delicious food  
And the best wines of the earth*

Then the poem describes what pleasure such a meeting



could create. Friends would start recalling their memories and lovely conversations:

*And I was glad to invite my beloved  
And was eager to see every one of them  
To their memories with me,  
Their conversations  
And all that a friend could tell his pal on drinking.*

However, the dreams end, in turn, in the same disappointment. For after a long and bitter waiting, the poet concludes his poem by this painful agony:

*It was a tearful supper  
And those I invited had left secretly  
And were serious about it.*

Sami Mehdi, on the other hand, does not see in his poetry of "decline" a sort of lament to the past, a complaint of the age or a condemnation of technology. To trace these points in his poetry is a matter of great difficulty because time, as we have previously mentioned, is closely connected with the city and its aspects of life. In many of Mehdi's poems, looking back with nostalgia is wonderfully mixed with the sense of life and its transformations. Some of those poems could be treated as lament to the past.

The poet is undoubtedly very much concerned with the expression of the break-up of human relations in the society of the city. He is also concerned with pinpointing that intimacy of things which makes people pass and meet each other as if their eyes are closed and unable to see the novelty of things. However, it is not only the novelty of things that stands behind that, but also the fast beat of life. His poem *Mawa'id* (Appointments):

*We were not afraid of love  
Or ashamed  
But when we were taken by surprise by it  
And fell under its fire  
We arrived at the end of our appointments and departed  
And we were, as it was said about others, in a hurry.*

expresses a new kind of love that we have never known before. Undoubtedly, the experience of love presumably remains stronger and more exciting than the familiarity of things. It is a unique moment of attentive listening to the call of soul and body and touching upon their warmth. Yet, the rapid life of the reality Mehdi expresses has reached such a stifling state that it kills the magnificence, depth and spontaneity of love.

This poem and many others pose an important question about the dark image of the city in Mehdi's poetry which expresses a world of great change and rapid decline. Many of his poems mirror this world with impressive images. Nevertheless, readers sometimes feel that the Iraqi or Arab cities are still less complicated than the ones the poet saw or lived in. The former still have a long and tiring way to go through in order to become equal to the big cities of the world: equals in culture, luxury and sadness.

Certainly, there are two factors that helped to form Mehdi's view of the city. The first one is his stay in Paris which made him realize very keenly the fact of decline. The second

factor is the cultural background behind this idea which the poet persists in expressing. His poems, no matter how distinct and condensed, many times make it appear that this cultural background, contemplation and adequacy go beyond the poet's actual experience.

Mehdi's poems represent, in fact, a growing effort to strengthen his idea of the decline of thought structure and people in the modern city. They, actually, manage to present this more often. Yet this idea sometimes loses part of its cohesiveness when the poems do not attempt to present an adequate vision.

The point that surprises Yassin T. Hafidh's reader is the poet's poetic language. He is, it seems to me, one of the few poets on whose writing the city has left its terminology and diction. The problem of diction is no longer a source of worry to him, for the language of his poems belongs completely to the modern city and is far from the smoothness which normally distinguishes the language of poetry. I don't think there are too many poets who are ready to welcome the use of such words as: exhaust, clinic, workshop, gas, microphone, electricity, bulldozer, Boeing, Volkswagen, file, scraper, sewage, sandwiches, throat, rubber, etc. Sometimes, we find that some of these words fail to clarify the sentence or the line. Yet, many of them have a role to play in the whole poem. In Part VI of his long poem *al-Nashid* (The Song), the poet draws a picture of a rising life:

*Between my house and the horizon  
A shovel roars  
And a train  
And a harvester  
And a cement factory  
And trucks pass one by one  
I went too far,  
Crossed the dams which created time  
I went too far to see these new rituals.*

He draws a new reality that has become a background for a new mode or even a psychological context the poet has never known. He is now in the presence of "new rites" for which he crossed many barriers that prevent him from living a different way of life to the full.

In his poems, the rhythm resembles the language he uses. In it we find some aspects of the city such as depression, dryness and confusion.

His approach in the use of metre generally stems from his way of thinking which is contemplative and not concerned with the glitter of things. The poet is not interested in the musicality of the poem or provoking rhythmic sorrows which frequently accompany poets with a provincial background. The beat of the Iraqi and Arab cities is irregular because these cities are in total disorder. The countryside stands not far from them and the heart beat of such a city is broken, sad and lacks the harmony which is natural in a society not yet completely modernized. The heart beat of the countryside is, on the other hand, completely different. It is comprehensive and harmonious: the beat of the green and the open space; the field and the rolling land; the darkness and the light.

Sometimes we find in Hafidh's poems a dominant sense of complaint about the city, complaint of the slow and repetitive way of life which kills every pleasure. His poem *al-Arabat* (The Carriages) is a bitter satire about the heavy weekdays which are made dull by work and monotony of daily life:



*The seven c-a-r-r-i-a-g-e-s*

*Move*

*Follow my face*

*Loaded by gas, coffee, scrap and bread*

*And documents of the office which is moving*

*And the people wrapped in sacks.*

The poet breaks the word "carriages" in order to express the slow movement of weekdays and the lack of harmony. As for the word "the seven" *Al-Sabi* in Arabic, the poet has separated the Arabic definite article *al* from it in order to show the cruel nature the poet finds in the weekdays. The Arabic word *Sabi* also means lion. The last three lines strengthen our sense of repetitiveness. They lack beauty and the repetition of the conjunction "and" makes them too heavy. It is time pursuing the poet even at the moment of his relaxation and rest:

*I get down of a week's carriage*

*I sit tired at the day-spring*

*I wash my face*

*I taste the breeze*

*The white flower and the sweet face*

*Then hunger comes*

*Stretching its seven daggers to me*

*So I kiss the face of Friday*

*And leave it.*

It is this hunger or need that prevents the poet from expressing the lust of body and soul.

As I mentioned, the rhythm of Hafidh's poems is closely connected to his way of looking at things. This rhythm is unified with the city and comes out of it in a relation devoid of extreme hatred or exaggeration in loyalty to it. His poem *al-Hakikawal Kalimat* (Words and Truth) ends on a note that emphasizes a relentless bound:

*It is this city that I have*

*And its spiral pipes*

*No road but its,*

*My skin is full of the engines' roar*

*And the smell of gas and oil.*

It stresses the fact that this city is his own big reality in which he finds himself and the meaning and values connected to it. It is both reality and the road that leads to it:

*I have only this road to it*

*I saw the truth*

*So I am qualified to see it then*

*The trance of love was my silk cover*

*And deep well.*

The theme of time is closely related to the city and the sense of time is one of the "commonest senses in the city" In many of Hafidh's poems, there is a strong sense of time that pervades everything. His poem *al-Bustan* (The Orchard) is a bitter elegy and a tragic sense of the burden of time which reminds one of the lost youth, excitement and friendliness:

*And above the faces of those coming to the orchard*

*The sound of their wading rises*

*And the orange blossoms remain blooming for weeks*  
*On the water*

*So forgive my memory*

*And forgive me if I missed other trees and names.*

From another point of view, there is a desire to be unified with nature and its wonderful creatures, water, breezes and greenery. Besides, there is an abundance of tolerance that could embrace everything:

*Wait, a grasshopper is coming*

*And here is a tortoise*

*Poet of an old family*

*Is coming just like me, green and forgettable kingdom*

*Half dry, dooms*

*And half water.*

*Wait! Do you see it as a creeping branch*

*Green*

*Its smoothness is spreading intimately*

*And turns like a thread of love in the naked area*

*I see your eyes; snake*

*Come closer*

*Intentions are changed. We are no longer enemies.*

Sometimes the sense of time in the city is so intense that it turns into a deep sense of alienation that cannot be relieved even by mixing with people, an attempt which might, in fact, make things worse. The poet may try to be friendly with some people and to have his own close social group. An attempt to break this solitude might even lead to another solitude. In his poem *al-Thuyouf*, Hafidh deals with this subject which is later treated by Mehdi in his *al-Asha' al-Akhir*. *Al-Thuyouf* starts with expectations:

*Waiting for the guests,*

*I left my book on the table.*

The problem of waiting grows and spreads: the poet spreads his worries on everything close to him: the garden, book, table, wires, the water in the garden. And through clever dialogue, questions, soliloquies, the word "guests" and verbs of arrival are repeated. In certain parts of the poem, expressions and sentences such as "Will the guests come?" "Guests will arrive" "They will search" "Will they search" are repeated. The word "guests" is repeated eight times; the verb "comes" eight times; the verb "arrives" six times. All suggests the importance of the arrival of those guests:

*Your shadow creeps behind the wall and watches*

*You behind the wall suffer from the arrival of guests*

*And embrace them one by one*

*But they did not come*

*It is water irritated by sand and straws*

*And repulsed by stones falling on its surface*

*The guests will arrive.*

Then the poem moves on to intensify this expectation and possibilities increase to comfort the poet. Probably the guests are still on their way to him, or may be they will arrive late for one reason or another. Everything is ready now; the garden is sprinkled with water and trees well-cut; the drinking table is waiting for them:

*Guests will soon arrive and our night starts*

*The table is ready now*



*My wife has changed her dress  
And I'll start with a glass before they come*

The poem ends with this little personal dream unfulfilled:

*"What would you like?"  
Hats appeared  
And whispers broken  
I suspect them -coming  
Again the bell rings  
"Yes...coming"  
But they were not the guests.*

Thus all that growing anxiety comes to an end. So do the exciting questions that irritate the soul, and the body, and the sweet waiting for the pleasing guests. They are all replaced by suspicious whispers and horrific ring of the bell and the hats that appear from behind the wall.

True this is not only solitude, but solitude about to enter one of the cruellest states.

The city might take on the form of a memory as is the case with the poetry of Hasab al-Sheikh Ja'far or the form of a dream or symbol as with the poetry of Hamid Sa'id. The city in the latter's poetry has a symbolic presence arising like a new star, leaving behind a wealth of feelings of bitterness and pride; rejection or longing. To him, the city is not a closely connected and developed life. It is not even details of a life or action in the city. In fact, it is a matter of coming up to the level of the symbol which offers the poem a special emotional tone.

The city in modern poetry might be used by the poet as a cultural background, as critic Ihsan Abbas once said, to "describe the loss and fragmentation which will later become a framework for his philosophy." It is true that some of Sa'eed's poems fall into this category, but they, nevertheless, retain a dream-like tone. Cities like Baghdad, Beirut, Damascus, Granada, al-Quds, Jaffa, Amman, Hilla and Gaza remain immersed in an emotional heat. These cities grow in number and space although they maintain their dream-like and symbolic essence. They frequently enjoy a significance that goes back to the political awareness of the poet and his social and moral conscience.

Undoubtedly, a poet's hometown always retains a particular presence in his mind. It remains a dream, a never-ending thrilling longing. However, this city, on the other hand, continues to exist with a daily life full of minute details that form its entity. This was the case with the poet's hometown Hilla, where he spent his childhood and youth, a certain reality that accompanied the poet and projected its characteristics on his imagination.

It seems to me that this city, like many other cities of Sa'eed's does not emerge from the poet's imagination as a physical reality. It is, in fact, a dream closely connected with the poet:

*I call you  
Then include you in my vocabulary  
Again in fires  
I see you laughing  
I say good evening  
Then I go to sleep. You come in my sleep  
And when I wake up: you are with me*

*We are one season  
And one love  
And beautiful memory.*

In his poem *Revolution from Inside* the poet places "the big cities" opposite "the fire cities" While the first ones represent falsehood and flattery, the second ones represent revolution and action:

*The rage of Arab emotion took me to the fire cities  
The wind of revolution carried me  
And bouquet of thorny flowers  
It threw me in the big cities  
It repulsed me  
I came back stranger  
Not used to the big cities  
The big cities ripped me off  
Stole my clothes  
The banner of the coming wound of the revolution  
Is on my door*

In many of his poems, Sa'id is identified with water as characterised by its violence and rushing torrents, a contrast to the city which reveals itself in a solid and eternal way. His poem *Small Stanzas for Euphrates* asserts the relation between the poet and Euphrates:

*I crossed love of water..! and Euphrates  
My father offered me my features and the colour of eyes,  
Poetry, delicacy and dream  
I drank from something called yearning.*

To be close to water or even to plunge into it leaves its echoes in his poetry. It even helps informing part of his emotional features. In many of his poems, Sa'id insists on this meaning. In a sense, Euphrates is a physical and spiritual emergence from paradise:

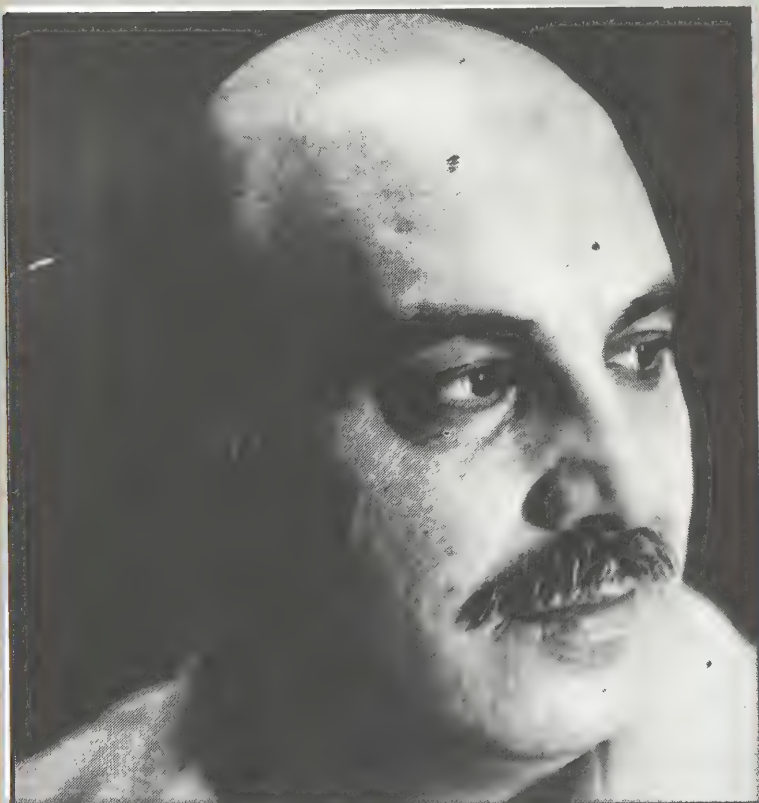
*On the brown cliffs my face  
Was its song. I took the risk to swim high  
My hands are paralysed. I did not arrive  
And did not pass my smile to the wound.  
I am Euphrates ... My clothes were salt.  
Salt and Euphrates by the right of my grandmother al-Zahra  
To her husband Ali.*

While water represents all these beautiful things in his poetry, Sa'eed asserts his immunity to certain features of cities like dryness and rugged appearance.

As I said, most of Sa'id's cities do not represent a certain reality of the city or even a special pattern of life. They, on the other hand, represent exceptional situations, historical, national, and political climaxes. These cities are not in a state of relaxation or comfort. Rather, they are cities in their most agonising states (Beirut) or they represent a certain loss (Granada), or resistance to occupation (Gaza and Jaffa), or even a yearning for the national past (Damascus). All these cities take part in forming a political and national framework of Sa'id's poetical vision where past and present events meet together. In his poem *The Three Islands*, the poet says:

*Granada is carried by the Persians on blind elephant  
They celebrate its virginity and offer the flower blood  
To the beggars who crowd at the Gate of Khurasan*





Samī Mehdi

*And to the mistresses of the palace.*

Here the aggressive forces of history converse and change the roles which they played and still play against the history of the Arabs. This exchange is carried out by a new preparation of time and place. Granada was a captive carried on a blind elephant. The Persians and not the Spaniards were leading it. Therefore, the history mirrored in Sa'eed poems is interrelated.

In his poetry, Damascus is an agonizing attempt to go back to the roots where there is clarity and youth. A poem entitled *Ishraqat Marwan* (Marwan Revelations) expresses this:

*Marwan's field appeared to me as I drew near Damascus  
I said...*

*I try not to provoke the trees' sorrows*

*I rested on a branch of olive tree*

*It broke*

*Then I tried to avoid the city*

*I have a desire to see Marwan's prison*

*Probably the far Damascus*

*Can retain its dreams.. and come back to Qassiyon.*

*And water come back to the river Barada.*

It is a strong desire or dream that our Arab cities should regain their leading role and place in the fate of the Arabs which is surrounded by intrigues, darkness and stalemate.

Undoubtedly the theme of poetry and the city is a provoking one. It opens our ways for thorough discussion and suggests various ideas.

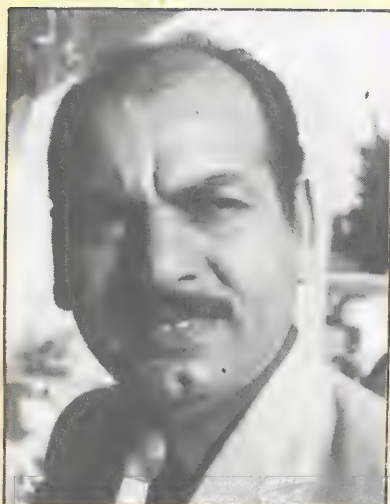
This relation represents in its Iraqi and Arabic poetical achievement a sort of participation in and witness to a rising world and emerging cities. It is only a beginning of new traditions and new modes that come close to the spirit of the age and its changing life.

Translated by Mohammed Darweesh





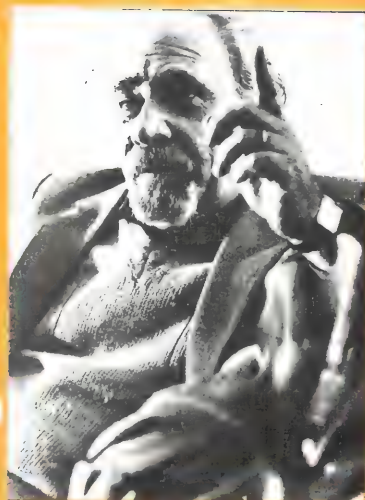
# The War Poem: Where Is It Going?



Ali Ja'far al-Allaq



Nazik al-Malaika



Yusuf al-Khatib

## ■ By Hatim al-Saqr

Is it possible for a poet, during a war, to write outside the confines of the war which dominates his life? And can we consider therefore all poetry, written during the war, as war poetry? Or should we limit ourselves to the poetry which deals directly with this topic? These questions should be taken into account before we attempt to handle the artistic dimensions of the war poem along with what it has brought to modern poetry.

Both the attitude and the situation are interrelated in the war poem; the poet becomes highly involved in the situation and, in turn, comes out as a witness: the war is a touchstone of his patriotism and humanity and a test of his language. As such, he cannot set them outside the process of writing as a creative condition when he prepares his theme and chooses his approach.

The modern poet is apparently dissatisfied with what is common and familiar in similar literature, or the attitudes and situations known to other nations. War is a major theme in poetry which was handled by the classical Arab poets: it is indeed a major theme that includes description—portrayal of the battle and its machinery, boastfulness—what the poet and his folk have achieved, enthusiasm—reminiscences of heroic feats, mourning—lavishing praise on the dead and the martyrs in the battle, and satire, criticism of the enemy and depiction of its defeat. The classical Arab poet has blended these topics in the texture of his poem.

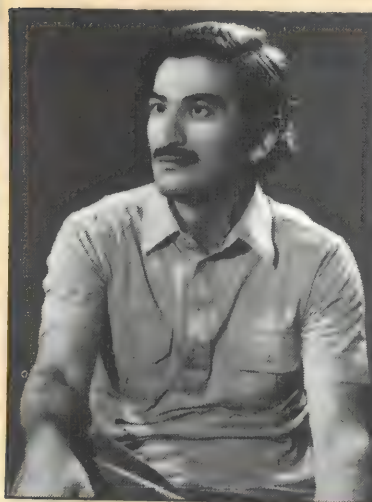
Most Iraqi poets have gone through the experience of war with Iran. They have either practically participated in the defence against the aggressors, who openly declare their expansionist intentions against Iraq or they have been in close







Mahmud al-Mutairi



Yassin Taha Hafidh



Shathil Taqa

connection with the war as a frequently recurrent term within this atmosphere. This requires that the poet has to be a scrupulous observer.

This primarily implies that he has to incorporate the situations, attitudes, and the small items of his life into the matrix of his poem, the poem which is not satisfied with marginal treatment of the topic, as was the case with the classical poem.

The elements of the theme of the modern Iraqi poem overlap to such a degree that it is hard to identify and thus demarcate according to their independent implications. This, I believe, runs parallel to the nature of the war itself. No longer is it therefore a partial problem about borders and rights but rather it covers soil, the individual, freedom, national integrity and future that are threatened by the aggression. Therefore, the date-palm, the drop of water, and rocks of the mountain all have their priority in the war poem.

Moreover, the layman who is dominated by the daily routine of his life and its peaceful terms, has turned out to be the protagonist in the modern poem. He is not the doer of supernatural deeds, as he was represented in the classical epics. We can recognize the ordinary people as soldier; they have their experience in life, their friends, children and loved ones. By leaving these behind, they have but to glorify life and seek its recourse to be noble, simple and free. And this is to be couched in an intimate and simple language.

#### The nature of the term

Critical studies have made a distinction between poems dealing with a specific battle and that which changes that battle into material for a big topic, that is, the war. In the war poem there are certain features, the most prominent of which is its transitoriness—it is closely related to time, place and action. That is why references are made to the prerequisites of a specific battle. The battle-bound poem covers an event or an episode which is merely a phase of the war to which the modern poet directs himself.

In this sense, the battle-bound poem is a continuation of the poetic Arab tradition which used to be preoccupied with a specific battle, shows an enthusiasm for it and documents its course, along with its heroes, and eulogizes its martyrs.

One of the features of this type of poem is that it exposes its intention directly; it is straightforward in the sense that it handles a very clear topic. It is also easy to be understood



because it transforms events into poetic images. Besides, unlike the war poem — being more comprehensive and more precise — it does not need to change events into symbols and connotations and then into poetic structures.

The war poem is not conditioned by time, it is a temporal. Again, what is realistic is rendered into symbols since it is more general in its orientations, more inclusive in connotations and implications. Also it does not overlook the event. Rather, it makes it its exclusive concern. In short, we can say every war poem is a poem on a specific battle but it holds also true that not every battle-bound poem is a war poem.

#### Aspects and implications

As an event, the war shook up the modern Iraqi poets in 1980. Iraqi poetry, however, was at the crossroads of modernity in terms of form and content. The pioneers had already rendered their achievements, which drastically changed the course of writing to the modern method. As to the generations that followed the pioneers, they were required to enrich the experience of modernity which was initiated at the hands of Badr Shakir al-Sayyab, Nazik al-Malaika, Abdul Wahab al-Bayati, Buland al-Hayderi and Shathil Taqa during the mid-forties. With regard the generation of the seventies, this generation found itself assigned with the task of making a venture to change the mode of writing poetry, which tended to freeze on the level of form, not responding to the changing variables. Thus the war came at a time when influences were in full swing and the list of suggestions and future prospects became too long.

Yet, this has paved the way for the war experience to tickle the nerve of poetry, being a social phenomenon that can respond to such a factor actively, quickly and clearly. This new experience has resolved many problems. It may be out of context to argue how far possible it is for poetry to embrace this new experience and this is also valid as to the disagreements on poetic forms ( free verse, prose poem and monorhyme verse). Nor is it possible to improvise upon the literary genres ( lyrical poem, long or short poem). The war has virtually levelled the ground in this quest, and it has provided rich material, allowing all literary forms and genres to live together.

The war in its first months breathed life into the classical poem that has a unified rhyme and metrically stereotyped syllables and revived a deserted poetic mode such as *rajz* and gave room to vociferous lyricism. Nevertheless, this is not the only aspect of the poetic response to war.

Side by side with the poems of Abdul Razzaq Abdul Wahid (renowned for his monorhyme verse and technical skill and delicacy of language), there stand the poems of innovators at whose hands the poem has adapted itself to brooding over the war and, in turn, rendering this into a language highly eloquent and more effective. Modern poetry — in terms of its effect upon the reader — has been searching for an indirect formula that gave the war its artistic equivalent without, in the meantime, sacrificing the virtues of modernity which had become deeply rooted through the efforts of the pioneers and the generations that followed them.

#### Samples and indications

In Sami Mehdi's poetic experience, his life experience comes in as an element worthy to be considered. During the war, he passed through a living experience in 1981, when he joined with a group of the Popular Army in Sayhan — a village in Shatt al-Arab area. In the concluding part of his anthology *al-Zawal* (Extinction), the poet says: "This village reminds of the Sumerian ancestors" This is how he sees the village in his two poems *Sayhan 1981* and *Raayt Ma Raayt* (I See What I See). Such a sentiment was so strong that it made the poet ask from the very beginning of his poem the following questions:

*Who are those? Who?*

*Men who wore the attire of Gilgamesh.*

*Or Gilgamesh distributed in men?*

*How would they know that the secret is here, and the herb is here?*

*How did they sneak into the centuries.*

*And so did the centuries ?*

One can notice that the poet has drawn upon the ancient Iraqi symbol Gilgamesh and his quest for immortality where he descended to the underworld asking his grandfather Ut-Napishtim about the secret of immortality. This reflects the grass-roots of the conflict: the past which is manifested in long history and culture threatened by aggression.

Moreover, the poem takes up a prose structure which brings it close to the hymns and prayers of the ancient Iraqis who sing for the resurrection of their goddess, Tammuz:

*Sayhan has become more than a village.*

*O men, Sayhan is a virgin.*

*Zara has a burning lust for her.*

*And he desires her.*

*To be a slave in his chapel.*

Soldiers are accordingly required to search for the herb of immortality without going to the underworld. This they will find in Sayhan itself, which has turned to be bigger than a village.

Equally true, Hamid Sa'id recollects many of friends of his childhood now grown men with sons fighting in defence of the country. In his latest anthology *Tufoulat al-Ma'* (Childhood of Water) we observe that he recollects Iraqis by name. To him, the war does not involve a heroic encounter to be described in flat and general terms. It is men whom he knew while young, who have become fighters.

They sacrificed, and some of them did become martyrs. The poet drags them out of the deep recesses of his memory, following the threads of his relationship with them and sheds more light on their features before he projects them into the present. Images of innocence, rebellion are ingrained into our minds before we see them at the present time:

*Oft we tried to haggle with our sadness.*

*Or we pretend joy.*

*I tried to flee... and he tried to forget.*

*By being with another woman.*

*We met again in the zeniths of sorrows.*

*We tried... but never succeeded.*

But Mohammed the grocer, the protagonist of the poem of that name, never remains that sad adventurer.

His house, however, becomes a city and when his country is exposed to danger, he joins the army without delay:



*They murdered poetry.  
The beauty of the poem provokes death.  
That come out from their doubts to us.  
They came out as a graveyard... and we withhold.  
O Mohammed you know.  
Our laughter has never left us.  
Rebellion may start with it.  
And history will write about it.*

This is also true of other poems in the collection that starts with *Sergeant Abdul Abbas* and ends with *Captain Jalal*. In all these poems we get acquainted with those simple people who become fighters because the country, childhood and date-palms are calling them for that.

In the consciousness of Yassin Taha Hafidh, things take their dramatic turn. This is what has been achieved in his poem *The War*, published in 1986. Hafidh does not confine himself to a rigid duality whose poles are good and evil or right and wrong. He moves on plump into the event so as to experience the war both as an existing reality and a future prospect.

The poem, with its eight parts, weds the dramatic with the epic, since he allows time to move freely: past, present and future; picturing the scenes from the outside and focusing on the event itself. This takes place in the past, then goes to the present through the use of the personal pronoun "I". A long work as *The War* asserts the possibility of handling such a topic to the benefit of poetry where an addition can be made to the literary genre. Here the poet shows his dissatisfaction with a common theme and he is not at ease with lyricism in the sense that he approaches his theme from the outside as a transitory purpose. Consequently, the theme, both in arrangement and treatment of the war scene as an absolute human event, has been represented by the struggle between the ghost shrouded in black—symbol of aggression and death—and the lady—symbol of life and beauty.

Thus, the poet says: "I have made a decision, both myself and I, to speak about the war first in the human dimension and second in unwavering adherence to life that it should go on against approaching death."

Both the reader and the critic can arrive at this conclusion by merely reading the poem itself without consulting the notes annexed to it by the poet.

In the lady's prayer for life, we read an acknowledgement of the tax that life has to pay for the sake of peace:

*O life.  
Glorious you are.  
Everlasting you are.  
O majestic motherhood.  
All glory is for you.  
The coming eras are all for you.  
Tolerate the gravity of the strike and fires.  
In their flames the seed of time.  
In them the embryo of plants and fate.*

Through this duality with its explicit symbols and the richness of connotations, the poet weaves the threads of his poem. He begins with the onslaught; the sound of the siren transfers us to the midst of the war scene.

*A siren's whistle.*

*Roads are blocked.  
Kingdom of the dead is closed.  
War is declared.  
A nail hammered into my heart, I heard.  
A steeple falls down.  
O day.  
Sorry for the dust and sorrow.  
A veil of lead.  
Falls on thee.  
O beautiful boy.*

Life is the matchless protagonist in the poem. This is virtually a credit to the poem because of the human tendency which does not gloss over destruction and catastrophies and in the meantime does not flinch from the task of defending life, which is also the defence of country and peace.

### Mixed Influences

In a short poem written recently by Yousif al-Saigh, we recognize an effect wrought by imagination, enriching it with a line that develops in a story-like manner. This is also true to poems where the poet manipulates his talent in prose writing: story, essay and playwriting.

In his poem *The Murdered Date-plam*, he speaks about a palm which stands ten steps from a house in Fao. This date-palm, as he says in this part of the poem which portrays the house before the Iranian aggression, is:

*A palm still an adolescent.  
With wide eyes.  
And silk hair.*

After the aggression, the house was burnt, the door lost its latches and the palm becomes:

*A lock of silk hair.  
Hung on the fence.*

This stark laconic style has been made feasible by relying on narrative, delicate and suggestive, that carries us to the motive behind the choice of an incident he makes to stand for the war in general. The reader is to be aware of the title; it reminds him of the painting by the famous Iraqi painter Jawad Salim in 1985 under the name *The Murdered Tree*. The silk hair in al-Saigh's date-palm can be seen in Salim's tree. The remaining leaves on its boughs show a strange beauty and smoothness of line so that it is hard to identify the kind of the tree. It is actually a symbol that stands for a beauty falling down under the heavy strokes of a ruthless sickle borne by the man who intends to fell it, and the cruel look of the second man who climbed the tree to cut down its branches. Salim's tree may have some origins in al-Saigh's memory. The poet, however, did not confine himself to the date-palm in Fao only; he was speaking about the date-palms all over Iraq. The Fao battle of February 1986 was the motive behind this poem; yet, it is not the sole motive. This is indeed the reason behind the poem's richness and eminence.

In Malik al-Muttalibi's poem *The Date-Palms*, written at the climax of the Fao battle, we are aware of a motif loaded



with thematic implications. Even the title is highly suggestive, that is, it does not play the role of the conventional title since it is used very cleverly to indicate the content of the whole poem.

One aspect of the artistry of the poem is that it does not refer directly to the date-palm by name, but the date-palm is present in the poem through the introduction of its features only. As such, the reader cannot identify a certain character in the poem unless he is well cognizant of the title.

In the past, however, the classical Arab poet used to invoke the ruins, animals, trees and places making them speak in the first person (reference here is to be made to Ibn Khafaja's poem on the mountain and Antar's horse which complains in tears). Al-Muttalibi has made use of these features directly in his poem.

Whereas, the tree of Salim is the starting point in al-Saigh's poem, the shout of al-Ma'arri, the classical Arab poet, is behind al-Muttalibi's.

*Console me, the white desires.*

*Have vanished, the darkness never withers.*

He reflects a philosophical perplexity towards the eternal conflict; light/darkness or life/death. In a similar vein, al-Muttalibi's date-palm shouts from the very beginning of his poem:

*Console me.*

*Earth before its birth was with me.*

*Console me.*

*Walk in my land.*

*And eat my fruit.*

*And drink a handful of water near me.*

*You will see me.*

*How I take off my crown.*

*And break my guitar.*

*And throw the gold jewels.*

*And wear the crown of Iraq: fury.*

The date-palm is presented here as fruit, shades and a pillow. It is a call to the traveller to rest and sit under the shade. Yet the date-palm is furious. Once it is attacked, it throws its jewels-leaves, fruit and crown to be replaced by the crown of Iraq which the poet defines with eloquence, conciseness and beauty. The date-palm stands in front of the embankment protecting the soldiers while its heart throbs in the soil: the soil of the country. On its death, the colour of blood tints the horizon. It says:

*My country is safe.*

*And the enemy is a mirage.*

Here the consciousness of the poet moves to the date-palm infusing it with his belief that aggression is evanescent however deceptive it may be. We can also recognize here that the influence of tradition is quite feasible and it is summed up in the Muslim belief that whoever falls dead in the defence of his country — the martyr — is alive. Hence the continuity of his message, voice and spiritual and moral existence. This has been rendered explicit in the Qur'an: "Never count those who

die for the sake of God as dead, for they have their provision with him."

In other words, al-Saigh's date-palm, as that of al-Muttalibi is fully immunized against death. This is quite understandable if we read into the Arab poetic tradition — the ancient Iraqi poem which portrays the resurrection of Tammuz and his revival every spring.

That sacrificing spirit has been spoken about with economical language: no redundancy, pretension or verbosity. The modern war poem is not occasion-bound, that is, whenever the occasion lapses, it does not lose its context. In short, it does not end up with a certain stance but it reposes on a specific condition. And here lies its virtue.

### Marshes Wedding

In Hor al-Huweiza battle, a number of enemy soldiers infiltrated into one of the villages and killed peaceful civilians before they were forced out by our valiant army. Alwan al-Huweizi was one of those who were martyred at the threshold of their houses while fighting the enemy.

Ali Ja'far al-Allaq has manipulated the story of this man. He portrays him as a bridegroom on his wedding night and thus he calls his poem *Zawaj Alwan al-Huweizi* (Wedding of Alwan al-Huweizi), investing his experience in the depiction of the marshes along with his unwavering preoccupation with it in his anthologies, particularly *Watan Li Tuyour al-Ma'a* (A Country of Birds and Water). His memory is replete with images of water, soil and trees.

Al-Allaq, however, is not carried away by nature as an aesthetic value. He is not a romanticist who throws himself in the lap of nature. He places man on the forefront of his poetic scene so that we see nature becoming beautiful when it contains man; it celebrates his existence:

*From blessed songs.*

*Between two blithe rivers.*

*A furious fatigue glitters.*

*In the crevices of hands.*

*Mashhoufs, full of nostalgia and water.*

*And sparrows of rain and singing.*

Here the poet blends the visible with the invisible, fashioning out of it a lively scene; the opposite of a still life picture.

In this poem — written during an abortive offensive by the enemy — the poet denounces the aggression and this also testifies to the idea that the modern poem is not inefficient to cope with the event.

Significantly, nature is handled both functionally and aesthetically. Huweizi's wedding is a testimony to resurrection from physical death. It is the triumph of life over death.

Again, the war becomes the major theme in the poetry of those poets who appeared in the 1970s. This group has become intellectually and aesthetically mature. Members of this generation became soldiers both in terms of their age and works. They have transferred the war into their poems and in every intimate and transparent language.

Jawad al-Hattab's poems provide evidence of this maturity. Values of martyrdom, heroism, and love predominate in the



poems of the young poets. But al-Hattab is an exception. In his poems, we do not come across this reaction to the war but we find that the poem goes beyond the reaction itself to cope with action.

His poem neither surveys nor documents; it makes use of its temporality as if the poet were a war correspondent in the early days of war.

Al-Hattab spares not efforts to pick out the small details of a single day in a war dairy; the soldiers, machines, love and courage, death and life, country and memories. It is a long sequence of things and names that have many implications in the soldiers' memory. His poem is an invocation of the world and it is also a meeting place between life and death; between the present as existing reality and future as a dream. This task makes it necessary for the poet to change the angles of his treatment and it becomes the daily scenario of the life of the fighting poet:

*All right.*

*For the sake of the star and the sparrow.*

*We will fight our battles.*

"For the sake of the star and sparrow". Is this a romanticism with which the poet wants to part company with his fellow poets to achieve self-assertion and establish his characteristic poetic features?

This assumption may hold true. Al-Hattab, unlike the poets

of his generation, has a living memory that simultaneously brings forth childhood, visions of the southern part of Iraq, family and the beloved. Thus, he accounts for the defence in a very intimate and straight-forward language:

*Never we demand but ordinary*

*And simple day*

*Sparrows wander in an Iraq*

*That belongs to us*

*Why that sinister bomb? The one-eyed death?*

Even martyrs have easy demands in his poems, thus in *Hadhadat Janaiziya* (Mourning Lullabies) , he writes:

*How much he loves quietness*

*Advise the moon to set*

*If he ever wants to sleep*

*How much he detests the silence of graves.*

In conclusion, the modern poem strives to blend with the event and approaches its topic. Nevertheless, it still has an artistic peculiarity that gradually asserts itself. We are entitled, after six years of war, to talk about a war poem that invokes its tradition and copes with its topic without mounting the wave of sheer and stark straightforwardness and enthusiasm.

This is virtually the test of modernity and art together with its intention to project a dream in a country that is threatened by the greed of an enemy which is culturally backward.

Translated by Shihab Ahmed





The first appearance of the Iraqi short story was associated with nationalistic awareness, in the first decade of this century. However, since the mid-forties the short story began to flourish as a result of the development of socio-political awareness.

This awareness was basically associated with the urban population after towns had expanded and developed and after Iraq and the Arab world had undergone various experiences which left behind a clearer vision of the future of the country.

The Iraqi short story established strong links with reality. Writers attempted to imitate reality, depart from it or implicitly revolt against it. Nevertheless, better than any articles or social research papers, the short story revealed

July 14, 1958 Revolution in Iraq. Moreover, what the writers of the 1950s considered to be a huge transformation of Baghdad does not seem to be justified from the viewpoint of the story writers of the 1980s.

A pioneer story writer, Fuad al-Tikarli, did not hesitate, in a recent story, to resort to illusion and imagination to balance his puzzlement and confusion in the face of structural and geographical changes of Baghdad. In fact, nothing happened that a story writer could regard as real change before the 17-30 July Revolution in 1968—and, to be more precise, since the mid-1970s.

Nevertheless, the historical perspective of the socio-political context of the Iraqi short story allows for a comparison

# Some Social Aspects of Iraqi Story

■ By Dr Muhsin J. al-Mousawi\*

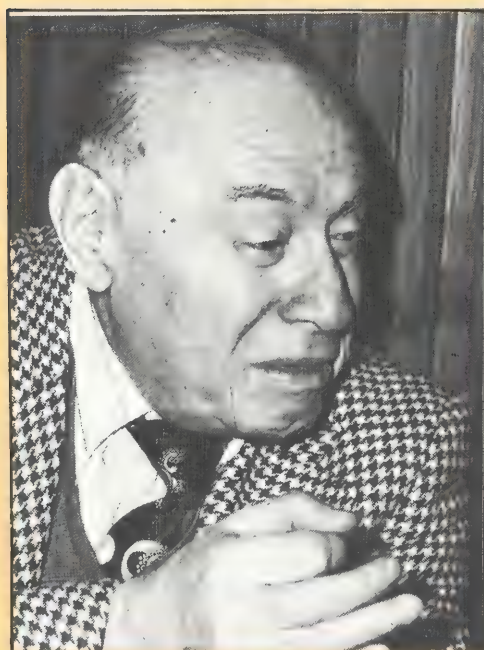
social transformations and the nature of awareness, thus providing the literary social critic with an easy subject needing only an objective classification within the context of time-place changes.

As the historical perspective provides an adequate formula for the sequence of events and transformations, it would not, however, mean anything unless dealt with on a relative basis. The passage of time does not necessarily imply decisive social transformations.

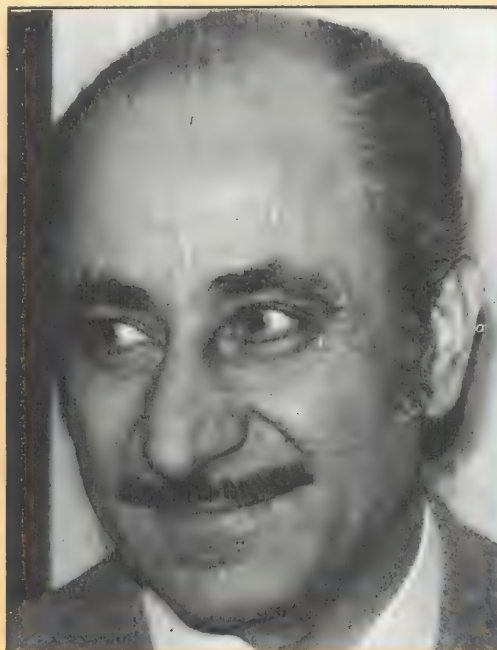
Furthermore, a political event might well lead to an artistic awareness of the short story or even promote a distinguished creative power, just as happened, for example, soon after the

between the basic stages of development of the short story and it also provides the reader with information about the ways in which the story writer influenced transformations in Iraqi society. The early short story was no more than a call for reform and nationalistic awakening.

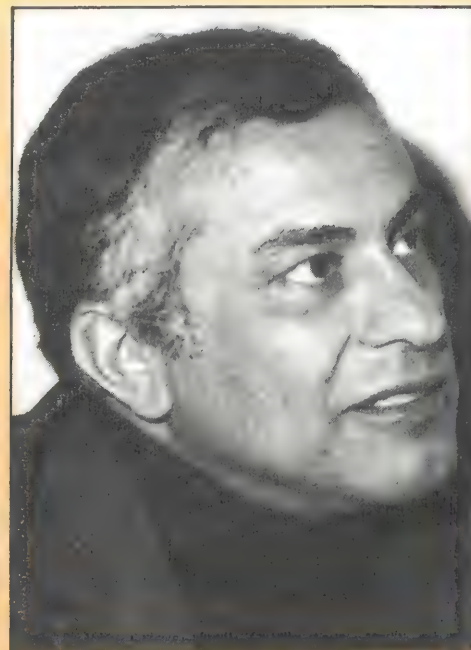
Whether the birth of the short story was artistically influenced by some Arab or Ottoman writing, or came as a natural response to transformations in general awareness after the 1908 Ottoman constitutional reform, the First World War, and the 1920 anti-British uprising in Iraq, the essence of such a birth was closely linked with the growing role of the national press of the time. Indeed, short stories became a permanent



Thul Noun Ayyoub

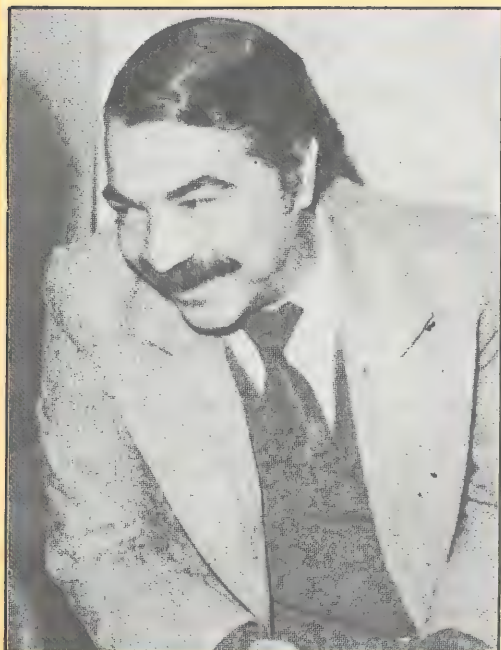


Fu'ad al-Tikarli



Abdul Rahman Majid al-Rubai

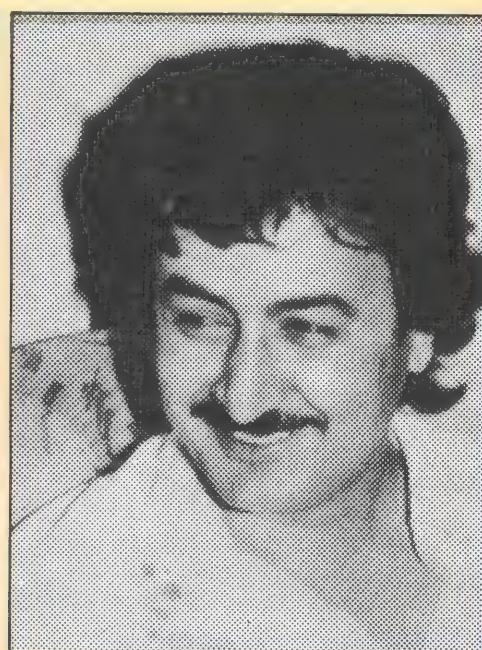




Mousa Kreidi



Lutfiyya al-Dilaimi



Abdul Sattar Nassir

feature of most of the daily newspapers. Story writers sought to promote nationalistic awareness by advocating scientific progress and social reform. And although the constitutional movement led only to consolidation of the Ottoman State's policy of ethnic domination, the intellectual debate on the meaning of reform and national independence and the spread of the daily press created adequate conditions for later developments in Iraq.

Through their works or even in their dailies, Sulayman Faidhi and others made clear the reason for writing stories and contributing to the press.

They admit a common awareness among the intellectual elite at that time. This awareness was defined by the drive to seek and establish reform. Therefore, the reason for publishing Faidhi's newspaper *al-Ikadh* (The Awakening) when he did is no different from the reason he gave in his novel of 1919. His concern was to awaken and alert the people, as he asserts again in the book *Fi Ghamrat al-Nidhal* (Amid the Struggle — Baghdad, 1952). What is important to the reader of this study is the selection of stories, acceptable but different in form from the realism of the time.

A magazine called *Tanwir al-Afkar wa Lughat al-Arab* (The Enlightenment of Thoughts and the Language of the Arabs) published many stories of stark realism. Yet, the "dream" of Ata Amin, published in the *Dar al-Salam* magazine (Nos. 17, 18, 1919), under the title *Kaifa Yartaqi al-Iraq* (How Can Iraq Progress?) was a departure.

The narrator wanders by the river Tigris at midnight. As he sings he becomes drowsy and falls asleep. That is the only background for the dream that follows. He imagines himself in a beautiful city, well-defended and ready for emergency or war. Its women, contrary to the women of his own country, are "respected". When he inquires about the city, he is told that it is Babylon, at the time of Nebuchadnezzar. As he meets Pirous, the priest, and asks him about the future of his country and the state of Baghdad both then and in the future, the priest replies with a bitter smile on his lips: "Poor Baghdad. You have suffered a great deal and have been patient under the swords and mattocks. The suffering and trouble you have seen during those various times made you groan and ask for help..."

Then the priest adds: "I can see your star high in the sky and your horoscope on land is better. Your future is blooming and you will restore your lovely days. You will be as strong as ever, as you want to be. You will regain wealth, dignity and power. There will be no more poverty or humiliation. Education will spread all over the country and Baghdad will be another London."

However, every situation has its own conditions. So the priest hands him the blessed seeds, books and tools symbolizing the significance of agriculture, industry, knowledge and science. This means that a writer of dreams is, like any other reformer, not a passive preacher. In fact, he is a reformer with a cause, who wants to establish it by making people fully aware of it.

Ata Amin would return to this theme in his story *Waqfa'ala Diyala* (A Stand by Diyala), published in *al-Iraq* daily, May 1921. The narrator tells the story of his beloved Venus and what happened to her. His beloved is only a symbol of his country which other people wanted to pillage and later return to him. Amin describes in detail the nature of the people who pillaged his country. He concludes the story with the restoration of the country to its Arab people.

These dreams assert the intellectuals' concern for the promotion of national awareness, as well as clarify the various elements which make up their culture. Probably the stories of Mahmoud Ahmed al-Sayyid and especially his lengthy piece *Jalal Khalid* illustrate the revolt of a whole generation against the sentimental writings of Egyptian writer Mustafa Lutfi al-Manfalouti and Lebanese writer Jabran Khalil Jabran and the acknowledgement of writings by Egyptian writers Qassim Amin, Shibli Shmil, Taha Hussein, Salama Mousa and Abbas Mahmoud al-Aqqad and by another fine selection of Turkish and world writers. The work of these writers became the stimulus, for Iraqi writers to find their own social reality.

The most illustrious examples of what a writer can offer his reader were those stories which dealt with background and culture. So stories did not go beyond the limits of education and preaching. Even a writer on the Iraqi story, Abdul Ilah Ahmed, depended on details mentioned in the stories of al-Sayyid in order to account for the "cultural development of the intellectuals".



However, it should be borne in mind that to depend on writers' reading and personal experience does imply a lack of knowledge of social reality or failure to grasp the reality of "city problems" that possess and preoccupy the writer's mind. Even when a writer deals with social differences in the city, he does not wholly examine them. Rather, he glosses over the subject. Sa'eed Abdul Ilah has done this in *Sakin Thalika al-Qasr* (Resident of That Palace), which appeared in *al-Hasid* magazine, No. 32, February 1931. The rich man expels an old woman who came asking for the wages of her sick son who works for the rich man. In a fit of anger, he bullies the old woman and beats her.

Al-Sayyid describes in *Thawra ala Abih* (Rebel Against his Father) how a neglected son writes a letter to his father, who is madly in love with his new wife, in which he tells him of his knowledge of his father's wealth and the reasons for his own neglect. The son concludes his letter saying that the irony is that the new wife is a perverted woman.

Details like these pre-occupied al-Sayyid's mind as did the subject of revenge. This he satirized in *Hadithatan* (Two Events), a short story published in *al-Talai'* (The Vanguard) collection in 1929. The first tale is called *Nuktat al-Amama* (The Joke of the Turban). A friend of the man with the turban remarked that it was blackened with smoke. The man with the turban went home and came back again. The same remark was made again by the same friend. The man again went home again and returned once more to his friend who repeated the remark for the third time. Here the man with the turban shouted that he had just killed his wife and sister and now only his old mother was left. By this, al-Sayyid implied that tribal customs often depend on allusions made in conversation. Symbols and puns can lead to deadly mistakes. The man with the turban thought that the remark did not really mean that his turban was soiled. He believed it meant that his honour was disgraced since he connected the turban with his honour.

In a story called *Shahama* (Nobility), the writer deals with a similar story about Safwat Beg, a man of obscure background. In a typical Baghdadi drinking session, the subject of revenge is raised. Nu'man's mother, who became a prostitute, was named Drunk. Safwat thought his companions were talking about his own niece who lived in al-Toub area in Baghdad, and whose income came from a mysterious source. He went back home and took a large knife. His wife started screaming. Their neighbours flocked in and put him to bed. The story is a detailed one, with its description of Baghdad, its streets and taxis. However, the joke is against Safwat, his origins and weaknesses, rather than about revenge or prostitutes.

What al-Sayyid wants to say is that if a man has no background or cause, he will not have dignity. When Safwat wakes in the morning, he can not remember anything that happened the day before. Events were now vague images, shadows that disappear with the day.

Wadi' Juwaida treated the subject of tribal customs in his story *Qatil Yatalam* (A Killer in Agony), published in *al-Hasid* magazine, No. 29, February 18, 1932. The story is about a young man who relates how he and his brothers decided to have their revenge on their sister, whose love-affair has become the talk of the village. As she is on her way back from the harvest, singing, the brothers attack her. When she sees her young brother among them, she says, "Even you, Hassan". This brother recalls how his other brothers ran away

while he was arrested and put in jail. When he was eventually released, he found that his parents had died. He could not live in peace, as the image of his sister persisted in his mind whether he was awake or asleep. Juwaida focuses on the significance of human agony in comparison with the superficiality of tribal customs of revenge.

The treatment of such a subject is again emphasised by Yousif Matti in a story entitled *Hutam* (Ruin), published in *Atarid* magazine, No. 1, August 1934. In this story, the writer presents the problem of prostitution in many lights. He places it within a general context of realism. The hero is in love with a young and pretty school girl, but one day he goes to a brothel and sees the girl, trying to pull him by his arm, while other men rush, shout at the top of their voices and seek to satisfy their lust. Old and new images of the girl are interwoven. The girl said she felt low every time she remembered him as a young man of principles while she had been a pure girl proud of her beauty. When she took him in her arms, he was about to make love to her, but he stopped to ask her how she had become like this.

"A very simple incident" she explained. "It was all because of circumstances. However, there is no girl alive who would tell you the story of her sin exactly as it took place; she would exaggerate and tell lies in order to move you."

Matti writes in detail and makes the schoolgirl who turned into a prostitute a woman of philosophy as she explains her experience of prostitution. Nevertheless, he emphasizes the contradiction in every character. The girl is still eager to lead an honourable life. The boy himself is divided between his submission to lust and his mind's rejection of the girl. The story ends with him becoming angry and accusing her of sin. Replying to this, she strikes him so violently that he almost loses his temper. However, he leaves the place, resisting desire and lust. In this context, Matti does not deal with prostitution as a clearly-defined social issue. Rather, he poses it as a multi-dimensional problem.

When the socio-political content of the Iraqi short story is brought into discussion, the first name that springs to readers' minds is that of Thul Noun Ayyoub. Ja'far al-Khalili wrote different stories about simple folk interested in superstition, magic and tricks. But it was Ayyoub who paid a great deal of attention to this subject. He even wrote about his own personal suffering in these stories. He mentions the reason why he writes in introductions to his books and in the many interviews made with him. He stressed that he was shocked by certain events and by "some government offices" of the time, which opened his eyes: "That convinced me of the fact that many social contradictions are due to various factors that dominate all aspects of life. That excited me and made me want to express my revolt. All of a sudden, and without my choice, I found myself expressing my views, experiences and criticism in small low-price books that could be easily obtained. Naturally, I wrote down my impressions, wishes and views in a fictional way that had both entertainment and construction. The stories, however, did not deal with individuals, but with general cases and situations".

He added: "An artist with no message merits nothing more than a passing image free from reason and wisdom. The meaning and their noble aims will bring fame to the artist. Styles change but correct ideas are the stones with which world civilizations can be built."

In making up his story Ayyoub gives prominence to ideas



which can be summarized: he sees prostitution as a result of the social condition; he rejects revenge customs, as he did in his story *Sharaf* (Honour); he seeks the liberation of women from the veil and rejects the pressure exerted by men in power on teachers during examinations.

In a collection of short stories entitled *Burj Babil* (Babylon Tower) he exposes the corrupt administration system.

Unlike Ayyoub, Abdul Haq Fadhil goes along with Yousif Matti's approach in emphasising the human irony which exposes the reality without any imposition. Thus, his story *Nassib* (Lottery), 1954 — to be published later in his collection *Haeroun* (Puzzled), deals with people living in a city who depend on lotteries in improving their poor conditions. However, one family faces a problem: they lose the ticket. This incident might be a very ordinary one, but it focuses the social unrest and brings us closer to the city atmosphere so that aspects of daily life, disputes, ambitions and projects can be examined as through a microscope.

Although two story writers described villages and country problems, including the terrorism of feudalism, they only dealt with these subjects very marginally. Even al-Sayyid's story *Bithi al-Faiz*, published in his collection *Fi Sa'a Min al-Zaman* (Within an Hour — 1935), could not go deep into the life of the farmers and their problems. So it made use of the very nature of al-Faiz personality, who became angry at the Sheikh's insult and then forgave his enemy and family when he saw them threatened by the flood.

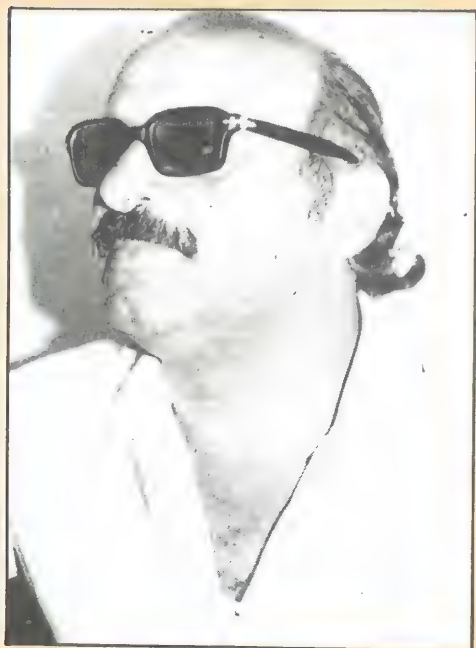
Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, other writers used the countryside as a background for certain ideas that had nothing to do with the life in the country. Even when mature writers, like Abdul Malik Nouri and later Mehdi Issa al-Saqr, write about the countryside in the 1940s, the relation between the writer and the countryside remains limited by the irony and the idea that defined the identity of the story. Nouri's *Fatouma*, a story published in the Lebanese *Al-Adeeb* magazine, December 1948, describes some aspects of country life, dwelling on the oppression suffered by Fatouma, a woman who, after waiting for years for her departed husband, was devastated to see him come back with a new wife and many children.

Al-Saqr's story *al-Midhakha* (The Water Pump), published in *Ghathab al-Madina* (The City Anger), Baghdad 1965, emphasises the role of thought in the story, whereas other writers show their talent in picking out country details and socio-political problems involving the feudal system. In this regard, Abdul Razzaq al-Muttalibi wrote *al-Dhami'oun* (The Thirsty) Baghdad 1970, Abdul Khaliq al-Rikabi *Man Yaftah Bab al-Talsam?* (Who opens the Door of the Talisman?) and Hisham al-Rikabi *al-Muba'doun* (The Exiled). Ghazi al-Abadi's story *Kalb al-Sheikh* (The Sheikh's Dog), 1962, was later published in his collection *Ibtisamat Lil Nas Wal Rih* (Smiles for the People and Wind).

The problem that drew the writers' attention and became a challenge because some of them had a country background, was the arrival of the countryman in the city. A good example is Shakir Khisbak's *al-Dhahiyya* (The Victim), published in his collection *Sira'* (Strife). The female woodcutter, Sabha, was a villager whose father had died as a result of the Sheikh's oppression. Her beauty fascinated the rich man Yousif al-Hadi, who, as he passed by the wood market and bought some wood, asked her to bring the wood to his house. When they arrived there, he closed the door, gave her a drug and raped her. When, after a few months, she gave birth to a baby, her brother drove a dagger into her in front of other people as an act of revenge.

If revenge is a recurring image in Iraqi short story, the rape of a girl in the city is not. Writers repeated the theme of the arrival of a villager, man or woman, in the city. Hasouna, in Dhiya' Khudhayir's *Wajh Min al-Mudun al-Junoubiya* (A Face From the Southern Cities), is a woman who sells milk and cream to the people of the nearby town. Her problem was that her lover wanted them to get married and move to the city. The writer throws light on her thoughts as she imagined herself crossing the main city street. Was it possible for her to accept the city for ever? Suddenly, she felt depressed and sad. Making a decision, she refused to change her simple way of life.

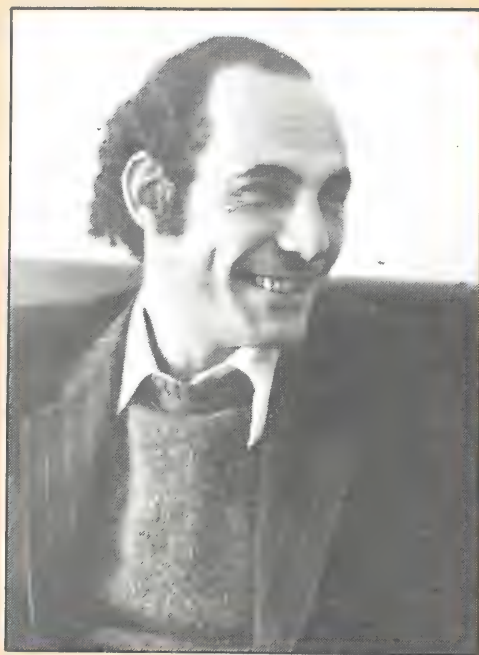
Story writer Amjad Tawfiq focuses on the mind of a villager whose son met martyrdom. The man came to the city seeking information about his son. There, he was surprised to see the



Abid Awn al-Rowdhan



Abdul Khalq al-Rikabi



Ahmed Khalaf



city: "The father's eyes looked for something in city streets to rest on. Everything was shrouded with dust. He looked at the men and saw that they were different from the villagers. 'Why don't they talk?' he whispered."

These features do not mark the history of Iraqi story with repetition or unified qualities. Rather, they serve to indicate the relation of the short story with the reality, a relation which has its own time-place aspects. The awareness mentioned earlier must be a deep one as long as time passes and the writer establishes a firm relation with the action. The action itself should also leave its marks on reality, changing and influencing the surroundings, the people, structure, customs and city planning. And whereas the political conditions stemming from the constitutional movement and World War I led to the Iraqi anti-colonial uprising of 1920 and its subsequent failure, this popular revolution itself did not create a radical change in the city, since it depended on citizenship, dignity and honour without actual organisation which could contain it or direct it so as to secure its success over the British forces.

Although the pioneering revolution of 1920 was led by famous national figures, its impact on fiction was not clear, whereas World War II enhanced awareness; consequently various political trends appeared which prompted the 1941 revolution, which was doomed to failure.

Because of this failure and because people were following the war news, the Iraqi dailies paid attention to subjects other than fiction. Men of letters found suitable magazines instead of daily newspapers, such as *al-Majalla* of Abdul Haq Fadhil, *al-Hatif* of Ja'far al-Khalili, *al-Fikr al-Jadid* of Jamil Hammoudi, *Ath-Thakafa al-Jadida*, *al-Usbou'* and *al-Fusoul al-Arba'a*.

This awareness was not exposed in political short stories, like Abdul Malik Nouri's *al-Za'im* (The Leader), published in Fadhil's *al-Mujalla*, September 16, 1942. Rather, it was treated as a general trend aiming at modernity and rejection of the old context of story writing. It is not enough for a story writer to deal with the problem of patients who were preparing to assassinate their political rivals, as Abdul Malik Nouri has done in *al-Za'im*. Modernity can be achieved only through another kind of awareness, the urban one, which could assimilate the various changes and deal with them. Therefore, the leap in the Iraqi short story since the mid 1940s was primarily related to the city. The individual's awareness is, in fact, an urban one. So is the awareness of details of daily life. Therefore, story writers stressed the relation between the individual and the city, emigration to and from the city, and finally, on the individual's personal problems after his relations with the environment had come to a dead end.

Among the many articles written about literary groups in Iraq, Rizq Allah Augustin's article, published in *al-Fusoul al-Arba'a* magazine of Buland al-Hayderi, requires some consideration. It is true that the article talked about the unhealthy expansion of Baghdad and was published in 1954. Nevertheless, it warned of a situation that later became a fact in Baghdad and other Iraqi cities. This was the emigration of villagers to the cities, especially Baghdad, in pursuit of work. This led to the emergence of cheap labour, on which Augustine wrote: "Until two years ago when the Planning Board was formed and started its work, I used to say that Iraq was destroying all its parts in order to build Baghdad alone. The growth of Baghdad is, in fact, not a real construction but

only a swelling disease which would have its horrible consequences since Iraq's moveable resources and the people of Iraq were creeping to Baghdad. Even the money of immoveable property sold was taken to Baghdad."

Then the writer introduces the problem of attracting money and people to Baghdad, which applies to writers as well: "Money in a kingdom is like the water of the lake whose fish are the people themselves. When the water evaporates or runs dry, it first dries from all the sides until it gathers in the middle of it. Naturally, the fish move along with the water in order to survive."

The growth of Baghdad and subsequent transformations were reflected in the writers' stories. Ideas and plots were no longer defined by the same criteria as that of, say, Ayyoub or al-Sayyid.

Rather, they went far beyond that, thus establishing a reservoir of inspiration that continued until the early 1970s with minor additions such as the personal awareness that grew after the 1958 revolution. Following political events added nothing particular to the story. Rather, they blocked creativity and brought worries and puzzlement to the mind since problems of political strife were now rife among the people rather than being the sole province of ruling regimes or foreign circles. New blood was injected into the short story only after the mid 1970s, after writers had established confidence in the 1968 Revolution, which was strengthened during the following years.

The increase in short story writing since the 1950s was characterized by a multitude of ideas and plots that allowed a certain classification of writing that appeared in the following two decades. The urban awareness, which I related to the shift and modernity in the short story, is not established by the story writer's knowledge of the city's basic structures alone. It also appears as a fascination with the means of communication especially the train, which for example became a small world that invokes all the recollections of al-Tikarli's Salima in a story called *al-U'youn al-Khudhir* (The Green Eyes), *Al-Usbou al-Arabi* magazine, April 15, 1953. These circumstances allow us to know the conditions that led Salima to prostitution. The repeated use of railway stations also emphasises the writers' inclination to go to crowded places, where everything is moving.

More importantly, urban awareness is divided between political interest and the knowledge of details of daily life which shapes the contemporary city.

The anti-colonial 1948 uprising in Iraq, the partition of Palestine as well as the political pile-up of events, created a special mode in the Iraqi short story. Iraqi writers using this mode included Abdul Malik Nouri, Mehdi Issa al-Saqr, Mohammed Rouznamaji, Nizar Salim, Fu'ad al-Tikarli, Abdul Samad Khanqa, Ghanim al-Dabbagh, Gha'ib Tu'ma Farman, Nizar Abbas, and later, Abdul Rahman Majid al-Rubai', Mousa Kreidi and Najman Yassin. The pain which Sattar Bin Salih Jarbuza feels as he goes to prison to see his son Qadouri, who was jailed with his friends as they took part in a demonstration, kills Sattar's sense of humour in *al-Jidar al-Asam* (The Deaf Wall), published in *Ath-Thakafa al-Jadida* magazine, December 1953. Meanwhile, al-Tikarli's girl in *al-Akharoun* (The Others), *Ath-Thakafa al-Jadida*, April 1954, rushes out with the demonstrators by her own choice, which is nothing to do with political groups. Al-Rubai's story *Mutarad* (Chased) deals with the problem of



the politician as a man hated by the city, just like the character of Yousif al-Hayderi in his collection *Rajul Takrahuhum al-Madina* (A Man the City Hates). In the story he says: "They're building a wall around the city, mopping it up from what is left to you. What are they preparing for you? He's left in the morning to the place where the workers gather in al-Nahdha Square. But as he saw someone from his own city, he ran away and vanished in the alley since he did not know the man's opinion of him."

In Najman Yassin's story *Buka'* (Crying), a child goes with his mother to see his father, a politician, in jail. He could not keep himself from crying, but he hears from his father about a villager who has been imprisoned for 20 years and still has some hope. The child tries to be strong, but bursts into tears when he sees his father. Other children have beaten the child and insulted his father. However, his teacher at school described his father as an honest nationalist.

Mehdi Issa al-Saqr uses the court not only as a means to express the horrors of the state apparatus which crushed all those engaged in political activities since the 1940s. Rather, he uses it to describe the frustrating situation of the city. So, before the arrival of the trial committee and its suspicion of the huge crowd in the court, and its attempt to find out the relation between the attendants and the accused, al-Saqr has set the ground for all this by a small introduction similar to those by Abdul Malik Nouri: "Widows, divorced, a family of an assassinated person, of a little girl attacked by an old man selling bread. Usurers, prostitutes who fearlessly make fun of policemen... lawyers, dressed in black gowns, listen patiently to their clients who tell long, strange, complicated and tragic stories... A city whose people are crushed by horror, boredom and agony. Today, there are among the people many spies in the courtyard..."

Thus, the court, its square and hall become the microcosm of a social field in the 1950s, and it included all social and political problems. Also, it told of the people's anger that would fasten on the hero of *Miyah Jadida*, (New Waters), a story by Nizar Abbas about a man who by accident finds himself amidst a huge demonstration in an oppressive city which he both likes and abhors. This man has been dismissed from work and now there is an attempt to get him back to work. But his boss had already insulted him and said that he was a criminal. The insult was a spur to remembering what had happened. To the boss, he said:

"You won't give me this paper (the paper of appointment). Well, the matter is not so important, but I want to say a few words that have just come to my mind. The new water will be strong this time. It is not the flood that swept the cities of the Old Testament. The water will be brown human beings, full of hatred and coming out of every city, street, corner and school. It will rush out of everywhere, sweeping our city and breathing new life into it."

The link between the innovation of cities and the ideas that call for a general change for the sake of man makes clear another important aspect of the urban awareness which is not limited to a small case, but strives for a wider vision that contains all cases and variables. Probably this awareness (or the general sense) stands behind a score of titles that mention the word "city". Fu'ad al-Tikarli's *al-Tariq Ila al-Madina* (The Road to the City — 1954) was an early example, like al-Saqr's collection *Ghadhab al-Madina* (The City's Anger — 1959). Ghanim al-Dabbagh wrote *Amal fil Madina* (Work in the City

— 1959), Mousa Kreidi wrote a collection entitled *Aswat fil Madina* (Voices in the City — 1968), Mehdi Ali al-Radhi wrote a collection of stories, *Mudun al-Shami'* (Wax Cities), 1981, Khudhayir Abdul Amir wrote *Bayt fil Dhahiya*, (A House in the Suburbs), al-Rabai' wrote *Najman fi Layl al-Madina* (Two Stars in the City's Night — 1969) and Yousif al-Hayderi wrote a collection entitled *Rajul Takrahuhum al-Madina* (A Man the City Hates — 1969).

It is much easier to discuss problems related to the city through those who come to or leave it and thus see it quite differently, regardless of social condition. Fatouma's husband in Nouri's short story of the same title is wandering in the cities looking for work at the end of the 1940s, thus leaving her deprived of her youth. However, story writers often move their characters because they cannot fully recognize the city. Al-Dabbagh's hero in *Amal Fil Madina* (Work in the City) sees the city as rotten and filthy, and wishes very much to go back to the village which stretched calm and peaceful before him in his mind. The writer returns to the same subject in his story *al-Ma' al-Athib* (Sweet Water — 1957), saying that he had received from his friends letters about their life in the city where "boredom sometimes kills us and only a coffee shop or a pub would fill our empty times". Escape from the city to the village or to the woods is seen as a salvation from condemnation and harassment. Thus, we see Younis, Ahmed Khalaf's hero in *Sahm Fi Ghaba* (Arrow in a Forest), surrounded by fear. In his love for a girl from the city, he sees a curse following him, seeking revenge. And since surrender and submission don't comply with his village morality, he realizes that to get away from the city is the only solution.

The socio-political conditions may press on the characters until they believe themselves driven by an implacable Fate. Characters of Abdul Sattar Nassir in *al-Khadim* (The Servant), *al-Ghuraf al-Siriyya* (The Secret Rooms) and *Moujaz Hayat Sharif Nadir* (An Outlife of Sharif Nadir's Life) are only few examples. Those characters are from the city but they face an oppressive power governing their life, so that only later do they wish to run away from the city. One of the characters says:

"I was surprised to see that I was so far from the heart of the city. Women's streets disappeared while my house and quarter vanished behind the grand new constructions in my city".

Contrary to characters who run away from the city, emigrants insist on staying, no matter how difficult the social conditions. Gha'ib Tu'ma Farman, in his story *al-Sheikh* (The Sheikh) chooses an illiterate old emigrant. As the old man finds some words written on his door for the second time, he asks someone to read it for him. The words tell him to leave the quarter and the whole city, but he insists on staying in spite of all provocations that he and his fellows have suffered. The problems facing new emigrants are insuperable. Story writers managed to pick up some of them, just as Shakir Khisbak has done in his story *Amina*. Nevertheless, their ambitions required an excellent story writer to express them.

Khalid al-Rawi picked up one of these in a story called *al-Araba* (The Wheel-Cart). A young street-cleaner was fascinated by his landlady and always loved to watch her. When the woman had some pain in her back that prevented her from making any movement, it gave him the chance to touch her. Her aunt asked the young man to help her lift the woman to her bedroom. When she handed him some money, he refused and left delighted, because he had touched the



body he loved. Like the story writers who have no compassion for their characters, al-Rawi could not develop the situation and left it as it was without climax. However, it was the relation between the individual and the city that drew the story writers' attention. The treatment of this relation ranges between the writers who stick to the city's physical reality and those who depart from it, between submission to this reality and the critical examination of it. In Abdul Malik Nouri's *al-Rajul al-Saghir* (The Small Man), Um Abbas becomes sick and so she asks her son Abbas to fetch her daughter. As a small boy Abbas found that a big responsibility. So, at night, he goes by car to the place where he thought his sister lived. There, he lost his way and imagined much noise made by horses and people running after him, like ghosts. Instead of helping his mother, he shouts, asking her to help him. In the crowded world of the city, the only help comes from his mother since he has no father. This means that Abdul Malik Nouri refers to the unjustifiable demand that children should behave like grown-ups. Thus, Najman Yassin's child in *Buka* (Crying) is crying over his fate in the world of grown-ups. Fu'ad al-Tikarli also turns over similar social customs in the cities before any change. In *al-Wajh al-Akhar* (The Other Face) Mohammed Ja'far asks us to accept the blindness of his wife since it was an accident. Yet he refuses to be like the horse he saw on his way to Ba'quoba waiting for death after it had been exhausted by work and disease. He also refuses to be like the sick young man who asked him for help which he refused. But he gave a hand to the old woman who pushed him out of her way to get on the bus before others could take her place. In city life, he had to determine his fate for himself, since struggle for survival and cruelty prevail in the city.

In such a trend Mohammed Khudhayir proceeds, but without dismissing compassion from his world in treating his characters' relations with the outside world. For his characters' decisions are often linked with a reference to God and his prophets. In his story *al-Shafi'* (The Patron) Naziha heads towards the shrine of Imam Hussein although she is pregnant. In his use of outer details and abstract language, Khudhayir selects, in fact, a few points for emphasis. The writer, for example, did not say that her husband followed her right to the shrine. Instead, he says that she heard him advising her to take a rest.

In *al-Mithana* (The Minaret), the evening call for prayer impresses the girl who is going back home after visiting the old house where she was born. Her love of her old place and her search for comfort have found no satisfaction in a world that essentially lacks love and compassion. Therefore, her case remains a personal one and all conventions fall apart in front of her. So her mother has become "frog" or a "big woman" and she was "dark, as if she had been made of an old tree". It was the girl's loneliness and frustration that made her leave the old place and she found only her mother to take her in her arms. Because of such frustration, she went back again to the street. She was anxious to return home so that her husband would not miss her. However, Khudhayir had his own objective correlative for this frustration. The stork which she had watched in the old days had now left the minaret after destroying its nest: "I am not imagining things. Everthing now seems gloomy. Even the minaret has changed and the stork which lived on it for a long time has now left it."

Khudhayir treated sexual deprivation very differently from some young writers who fill pages with shallow writing. He,

instead, made it an actual fact that has its role in the relation between the city and the individual. The two girls in the story *Umniyat Qird* (A Monkey's Wish) work very hard and rest only during the week-end. They live in a rented room on a second floor overlooking a street. They spend half of the week-end cleaning and washing at home. For the rest of the day, one of them goes shopping while the other one sits at home and contemplates a picture hanging on the wall opposite. The picture is of dark men riding horses and surrounding a tired and wounded lioness. This woman once looked out of the window and saw a Gypsy who told her that a monkey has ridiculous wishes. He also said that his wish was to imitate the Sultan's wife as she sleeps in bed with her legs drawn high. The girl understood the implication and how the monkey looked at her. So she went to sleep like a wounded lioness and waited for the men's attack. The writer has obviously related sexual deprivation to social conditions and set all images in an acceptable form.

On another social level, Jalil al-Qaisi focuses in *al-Samaka al-Tariyya* (The Fresh Fish) on a rich and beautiful woman who lives on her own and buys fish from a schoolboy. The story tells us how the boy and his friend one day peeped through her bedroom to see her resting in a queer position with a dog. However, this does not imply anything since the dog keeps away from her because of the smell of the fish. It never does mean much, since we do not know what happened next.

Understandably, poverty was quite common among schoolboys during the 1960s. This would explain why the friend was happy when they hooked a big fish: "We could go fishing by day and study at night. Imagine, if we could earn three dinars a day. It is much better than one long suffering and sitting stiff at desks."

Then he adds happily: "I shall buy the red shoes we saw in the store. With the rest of the money, I shall buy that coat which you liked."

Abdul Sattar Nassir's *Ra'ihat al-Biyout* (Smell of the Houses) is as important as *al-Samaka al-Tariyya* (The Fresh Fish). The writer does not isolate sex from the social conditions. He traces, through the narrator, the child who grows up in *Agid al-Mijadi* (The Beggars' Alley) and realizes that the alley's people have become victims of both Nawaf, a Jewish merchant whose drugs gave them only paralysis and pain, and the mysterious Manhal Ghabban who is said to be able to cure them of all diseases. Poverty and sickness draw people to these two men who exploit the alley's girl and do not hesitate to sin. The two men's plans seem like a net that nobody can escape. However, the narrator shows us the complex that he had developed, and thus the writer himself becomes submissive to Nawaf's and Manhal's desires. With insight similar to that of the Egyptian writer Najib Mahfoudh, the narrator exposes the miserable social conditions where people still adhere to social conventions and values in spite of the alley's sins, crimes, wretchedness and diseases.

Some other stories deal with the problem of prostitution caused by social deprivation, a condition which requires a great deal of sympathy and care. Al-Tikarli's Salima in *Al-Uyoun al-Khudhr* (The Green Eyes) is a prostitute who, nevertheless, has hopes and passions and desire to lead a comfortable life, especially after a meeting with a young man in Baqouba city. Abdul Malik Nouri's treatment of Badriyya, in a story of this title is characterised by exaggeration.



Badriyya likes a young man who seems to be different from the others and consequently falls in love with him. Nouri deals with this subject from another view in his story *Ghathayan* (Nausea). The hero goes to a brothel, but soon leaves when the image of his beloved comes to his mind. Although this has something to do with the hero himself, the story writer seems to point to the condition of the prostitutes and their social deprivation. Other writers, like Mohammed Ruznamaji, approach the problem directly when they deal with the social reasons for prostitution. The prostitute in his story *Hikaya lil Sada* (A Tale for Gentlemen) tells the people sitting with her how the Sheikh's son seduced her and moved with her from the village to the city so that she could establish new relations among the gentlemen.

The recurring image of the city is not a beautiful one in many stories until the mid 1970s. Al-Saqr sees the city as pus; Nizar Abbas as a whore; Mousa Kreidi as a cold graveyard and as a diseased place in Khudhayir Abdul Amir's *Bayt fi Thahiyat al-Madina*, (A House in the City Suburb) where the character builds a house far from the city but still feels anxious to live inside the city for fear that no one would know of him if he suddenly died. Meanwhile, Yousif al-Hayderi says in his story *al-Shabah* (The Ghost): "The shops were closed and the people swallowed by their houses. Only very few people like him were left wandering. Thick shadows began to fill every corner. The roads were stretching underneath the feet in the hot summer. He dragged his feet in the empty roads and felt he was a stranger who has become mere dust swept by a strong wind. He was wretched and hollow".

People like him would end up by slow death or suicide, just as happened to the man accused of murder in his story *Rajul Takrahuhu al-Madina* (A Man the City Hates) or as was the case with Naji Hanoun, the strange retired civil servant in Muwafaq Khudhir's story *Ilqi Ma Fi Yadika* (Drop What You Have in Hand). In Mousa Kreidi's *Uqdat al-Nahar* (Morning Complex) a similar type of hero is repeated. Mahmoud, for example, goes out looking for a doctor for his wife who is in labour, but returns home astounded to see that his wife has left home. He tries the hospital, but she is not there. Mahmoud, in this story, is different from Shakir Khisbak's Hamada in *Layla Sawda* (Dark Night). Although the two men are searching for a doctor, it is Mahmoud who rejects the city. He is nearer to a passive intellectual than to a social individual while poor Hamada looks for a doctor, met with constant refusals by doctors to go home with him to treat his wife. Therefore, he has to bring her a carriage: "He ran down the muddy alleys and often he almost slipped. He stopped only when he arrived at the orchard and realized that he was soaked. When he saw the carriage in a desolate area of the orchard, he became very happy."

The carriage sticks in the mud and its driver blames him for his bad luck. So Hamada has to carry his wife on his back in the pain-filled rainy night. The story ends with the death of his wife in an inefficient hospital. Hamada sees the city and its streets in a realistic way and without complaint although the city seems to him to lack love and compassion.

The city seems to the characters of Mousa Kreidi and Sargon Paulis like a hell with which it is impossible to establish any sort of relationship. This is true, regardless of whether the characters are a group of strangers or living together under pressure, social, political or psychological. It is also not a

coincidence that story writer Alia Mamdouh uses the words *Adan al-Jahim* (Eden, the Hell) to describe Radhiyya's experience, a village woman who allows bridegrooms to make love with her before they get married. It is also not a coincidence that her heroine, a girl thirsty for love, says in a story called *al-Mightas Wal Mutafarijoun* (The Bathtub and the Onlookers): "She did not cry out against her city, for she was dying alone in her lust and orgasm, for the place she was moving about was narrow but deep, like memory."

Also it is not strange to feel a state of repulsion and rejection of any city. The streets, pubs and coffee houses are full of evil and pain. Insults, expulsion and unemployment are quite common. In Shakir Khisbak's *Hayat Muhattama* (A Ruined Life), Aida leaves her sick father in bed and goes out searching for medicine. On the road, a police commissioner stops her and attempts to seduce her. When she refuses him, he accuses her of being a prostitute and tells a policeman to arrest her. By the time she arrives home, her father has died. In Nizar Salim's *Ashia Tafiha* (Trivial Things), a civil servant is dismissed from work because of a mistake that is taken for an unintentional insult to his boss.

In Abdulla Niyazi's *Dirham* (A Dirham) a child becomes sad when he loses the dirham (fifty fils) that first made him happy. Ghazi al-Abadi's *Masdar al-Khatir* (Source of Danger) is about a child looking at the cars in a workshop while a cleanly-dressed civil servant watches him. The man is first of all worried about the child because of the cars. Then he becomes afraid of the child himself, for he imagines what could happen if the child ran to him and smeared his new suit. Without any reason, the man slaps the child, whose head hits the car.

The city is a shelter for the wretched and miserable. It also yields pain and agony along with the seeds of evil. The gentleman who sits in the bus represents salvation to a young girl who has been chased by boys in Ghazi al-Abadi's *al-Mataf* (The End). However, the girl gives a shrill cry of alarm when the man slips his hand under her skirt.

Besides, the city sometimes brings death to people who try to understand its secrets. What happens to the narrator in Abdul Sattar Nassir's *Ghuraf* (Rooms) is a good example. The curious man faces the puzzle of some mysterious rooms which Othman keeps closed in all his hotels. When he persists in trying to know the secret, Othman's men bully him and throw him into one of the rooms. Although the story is concerned with curiosity, it also exposes the mystery of the big city, in which curiosity ends with disappointment following a complicated pattern of secrets, obsessions, illusions and relationships. It is such a pattern that gives it a strangle hold on the individual and develops his feeling of being small and trivial. This sense made Abdul Malik Nouri write in 1969 *Zaman al-Hamir* (Donkeys' Age), a story which reveals the terrible fate of human beings if they change into animals, now full of lust.

If a sociologist critic of literature seeks to examine any of the above-mentioned examples, he will certainly arrive at a number of conclusions about reality itself. Poverty, disease, corrupt administration, irresponsibility and socio-political exploitation have all been fully aired in short stories. In the historical context, we might as well wonder if this stand has continued in the Iraqi short story since the 1970s.

If the 1950s was a decade that provoked writers and gave them a sense of change, then we might seek to distinguish



aspects of such change in those writers.

Mahmoud Jindari's volume of short stories *Halat* (Cases-1984) contains *Halat Harb* (A Case of War), a story which, through Ibrahim al-Ashtar, the narrator, examines the 1950s. As he goes every day to buy bread from the alley's bakery, al-Ashtar says about himself: "For more than 30 years, I have been carrying, at the end of the day, a paper or plastic bag and I walk down to the dark bottom of the alley, where my house lies".

Then he goes on describing the alley: "I have a special knowledge of the alley in which I live. It is a certain and precise knowledge. It is an unusually dark alley, in the middle of which there is a ditch full of filthy water."

The alley branches off a wide street. Across it, there is a bakery. On that day, the bakery is closed and al-Ashtar looks for another one. To his surprise, he sees that all tiny shops have disappeared. Instead, new buildings have been erected. He cannot even find his old friend Mamdouh Yassir's shop. The old and desolate yard is now changed. Everywhere there are new buildings. People are gathering to read various posters: he sees one poster with the words "Wake up" while another poster features a tough military man. "Wake up", he repeats to himself, recalling the fighting in Palestine, along with Mamdouh. On the radio, he hears about fighting going on with his son Sa'doun has been sent.

In spite of city changes, a generation which is used to peace and a settled way of life is forced not only to adapt itself socially but also to fully participate in it.

In Lutfiyya al-Dilaimi's *al-A'id Min al-Safar* (A Traveller Returns), the main character feels life is beautiful and bright: "I get off the fast car. The streets are washed with justice. Faces show happiness and the city does not despise its people. It shows its love for them every minute."

This city does not seem hellish. Now, it is a vital entity, blooming with love. The changes have swept away all the old places, turning them into modern facilities for the benefit of man himself: "The old alley recedes into the city centre. The revolution is creeping towards it and Baghdad quivers with love. The alleys are now supplied with electricity and the orchards are growing. The slogans, long kept in old secret papers, become documents witnessing the hard times."

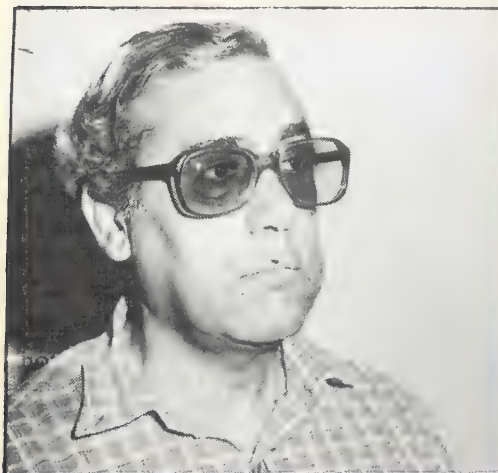
Another story writer, Juma' al-Lami, traces the personality of his character who has developed in a negative critical way and can't adapt to the new situation in spite of all material and spiritual changes of man: "Have you defeated yourself, Sa'id Kamil? The country is gaining victory everyday. Here are the streets ... Here are the people singing for the revolution and socialism."

Victory over self allows for an objective scrutiny of reality and admission of progress in all fields of life. Abid Awn al-Rowdhan's characters in *al-Madarat* (The Tropics) do not seek to adapt to the city and its realities. Rather, they desire to review their behaviour continuously. In Khudhayir Abdul Amir's *al-Qasir* (The Palace), a beautiful woman is in a crisis. She has a dream that gives her strength and courage to "live happy daily life as a determined woman who will never be defeated." The characters here, therefore, possess love of life, something contrary to stories of former periods.

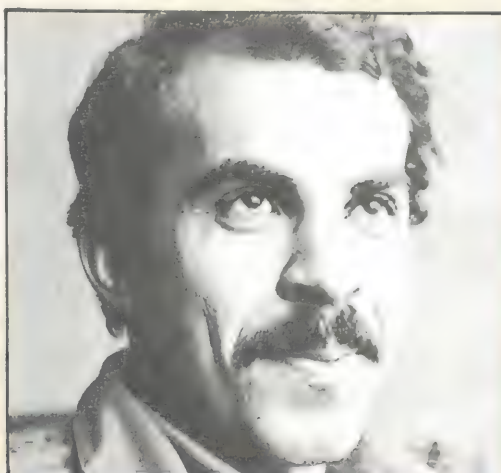
The mid-1920s stories were followed by a new wave concerned mainly with war and written as a result of writers being engaged in the fighting. In these stories, the coffee houses, pubs and dark rooms are no longer the setting whose details emphasise or illustrate the writer's ideas. Rather, the setting has become so broad that it shows all aspects of life. City life has its own problems, which makes the writer focus on it. However, new emphasis on domestic life has developed in many stories. Some war stories tried to feature both war and social life in the same story. This is quite clear in Lutfiyya al-Dilaimi's *Asha' li Ithnain* (Supper for Two) and in most stories by Mohammed Ahmed al-Ali and Warid Badr al-Salim. More importantly, a story like Thamir Ma'iouf's *Tahawulat al-Nahr* (River Changes) bridges the gap between politics and social themes of the Iraqi short story. The young man who is given a military task recalls on crossing the river how his father used to warn him against drowning. He also remembers how one day his loving father was chased without reason. All that he realized was that his father headed towards the river. However, a shower of bullets and he was seen floating on the surface of the river amid a patch of blood. Political harassment was quite common to the older generations. A new generation is now playing its political and social role, and the story writer is part of this generation.

Translated by Mohammed Darweesh

\*The author is a professor of English at Baghdad University. This paper is his contribution to Rutgers University conference on culture in the Middle East, November 1985. He is also the head of the Novel Critics Society.



Khudhayir Abdul Amir



Warid Badr al-Salim



Abdul Razzaq al-Muttalibi



# The Iraqi Story and Social Change

■ By Fadhil Thamir

This study endeavours to explore the various levels of interaction between the art of story-writing in Iraq and the social changes experienced in the country, both at the turn of the century (when primary attempts at story-writing were made) and at the present time.

For a start, this interaction will have to be observed with the objective of detecting a relationship of reciprocity between literary work in general on the one hand, and with the historical process of social change on the other.

There is always an interrelated profound influence between art of literature — as part of the supra-structure — and the social changes that occur at the base structure of the society. Thus, story-writing is subject to this objective law.

Yet, on deducing the special laws governing the interaction between the art of story-writing and social change, we are to be on our guards against falling a prey to a simplistic or a mechanical attitude together with our intention to identify characteristics of these laws. Most of the literary and artistic modes in the contemporary society follow a highly-complicated way characterized by relative independence in proportion to the base structure. It is also characterised by a growing influence of awareness of the various components of supra-structure and ideology, as well as the development of the technique of different literary and art forms.

Therefore, a study intended to deal with the interaction between the art of story-telling and social change should draw upon the following two levels: First: The influence of social change on a story in two aspects:

a. The content and the story-writer's ideology, or rather the reflections of social change on the story, and their impact on a story-writer's vision and consciousness;

b. the change of narrative structure terms of art, linguistics, expression and extension.

Second: The influence of the story itself on the course of social change.

A number of basic facts should be borne in mind by the researcher. We cannot always expect social change to go along parallel lines with change and development of the art of story-writing. A revolutionary change may not necessarily lead to a similar and quick modification in story-writing. Similarly, a social setback may not affect the standard of the story.

Hence, it may be crucial to examine the development of this relationship in the light of rules at every stage in the course of the development of the Iraqi story.

A story always makes use of a span of time to embody and reflect the social changes undergone throughout. This is one characteristic that makes a story different from an essay or a poem. The latter, for instance, immediately adapts itself to, and is expressive of, social change.

Thought and concept directly influence social change and public consciousness while literary and artistic works have an indirect impact which assumes a complex, aesthetic and ideological shape. Literary genres of poetry, story and novel have different levels of this impact which should be identified when studying the influence of the art of the story on social change and movement.

Since the late 19th century, some deep but invisible social changes have occurred. These are represented in a gradual disintegration of the patriarchal and traditional, feudal relationships under the Ottoman domination. New social forces and classes appeared on the scene, such as the trade bourgeoisie and labourers. Aspects of modernization started to emerge as a result of the influence of world capitalism and foreign companies, which later led to the 1920 uprising as a reaction against the new form of imperialistic hegemony.

Despite the failure of the 1920 uprising, the social infrastructure underwent some change, leading to the collapse of many traditional foundations of the feudal system. Instead, a semi-feudal and semi-colonial structure came into being. This, in turn, led to a gradual change in people's views and convictions. Intellectuals, thinkers and social reformers started to assume the role of defender of social change, asserting new values and ethics. Story-writers were among those calling for change and trying to play a meaningful part.

A scrutiny of the early Iraqi stories reveals a naive, almost primitive, technique because of the backward level of production and social forces. Examples of this may particularly be seen in the so-called "visionary" stories and early works of Mahmoud Ahmed Al-Sayyid and other story writers of the 1920s.

The first type of story clings to illusion and puts forth a dream of social change without attempting to face up to objective conditions of change on the social level or its

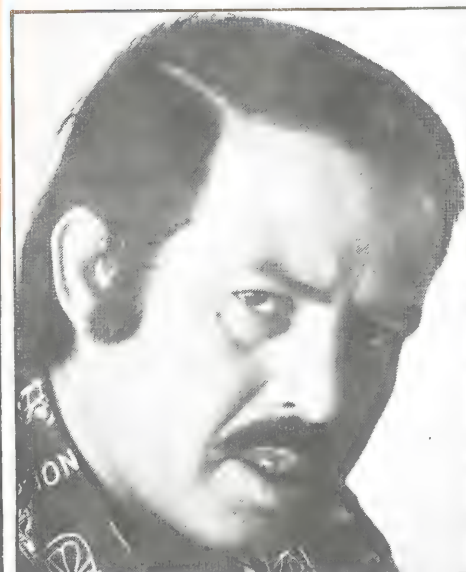




Abdul Haq Fadhil



Muwafaq Khidhir



Latif Nassir

realities. The writer would resort to dreams to compensate for the irreversible realities of the day and, by using symbols, to create an incentive for his readers to contemplate the dire need for change.

Most stories written by Atta Amin, for instance, and particularly his story entitled *Kayfa Yartaqi Al-Iraq — Ru'ya Sadiqa* (How Will Iraq Develop — A True Vision — 1919) expressed concern over coming changes.

Most of al-Sayyid's stories were imbued with calls for reform and change, indicating the major influence of the essay on stories of that era.

However, this article does not intend to belittle the efforts of story-writers of that period, as the above analysis should take into consideration the standards, cultural modes and level of awareness prevalent at the time. In those circumstances, writers had only limited means with which to achieve their aims.

Thus, the pedagogical trend, inherited from the art of essay, seemed a convenient method of expressing a desire for change. Critic Abdul Ilah Ahmed notes: "Iraqi novel in its early stages seemed to have a serious social orientation. It was marked by sincerity in seeking one of the goals desired by reform, social essays. Thus the novel intermingled with the essay and complemented it." This, in my opinion, also applies to the short story.

Yet the later maturity of social forces, particularly those seeking revolutionary changes, increased the awareness of story-writers and eventually made its mark on their techniques. Thus, the 1930s marked a second stage in the Iraqi story-writing art. Stories written at that period had some characteristics of the modern story. Nevertheless, it would be banal to claim that the 1930s marked the birth of the technically modern story, for that did not mature until the 1950s, though some examples augured a tendency towards that course.

Examples of this tendency may be seen in the writings of Thul Noun Ayyoub, Ja'far al-Khalili, Abdul Majid Lutfi, Yousif Matti, Anwar Sha'oul, Abdul Haq Fadhil and others. Their stories projected unambiguous stands in defence of social values while condemning backward aspects and the inertia of society.

However, most of those writers focused on minor points with limited scope of movement. Probably the reason for that was that story-writers believed the scope of a short story was limited in time and place, often centering on one character, or,

at best, only a few. Iraqi writers were unable to transcend those self-imposed boundaries until they started to write novels. The latter genre provided a wider scope for a confrontation with the persisting realities of society with all its contradictions, norms and horizons.

It must be said that those writers did instigate a motive for social change. They portrayed rural exploitation and persecution by the feudal system. They portrayed women's plight and the traditional norms which incarcerated them. Stories of the 1930s and 1940s, unlike their predecessors, had more intellectual influence.

The most important development in this art only occurred in the 1950s. A series of significant local, Arab and international events after the collapse of fascism gave rise to an overwhelming call for democratic changes world-wide. New social classes began to emerge, such as the working-class, the petit bourgeois and the middle-class. These started to play a considerable role in social and political struggle.

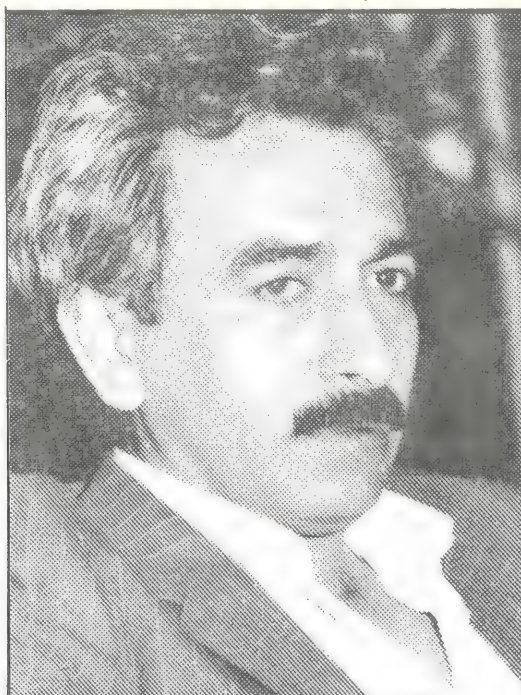
Iraqi story-writers at this stage became more aware of artistic trends and benefited largely from prose written elsewhere in the world. They were able to strike a balance between the need for social change and inner maturity of the story-writing and avoid the inequilibrium shown in the work of their predecessors. Examples of this development could be detected in the stories written by Abdul Malik Nouri, Fuad al-Tikarli and Mehdi Issa al-Saqr.

However, we cannot claim that all stories of the 1950s had such artistic maturity. Social cares often overshadowed the artistry to impregnate the stories with a naive, slogan-like directness, reminiscent of the works of the pioneers. Best examples of this trend could be seen in *al-Adab al-Qasasi fil Iraq* (Art of Fiction in Iraq) by Dr Abdul Ilah Ahmed who uses the term "story-writers of naive, political, realism" to describe the works of Salih Salman, Jassim al-Jowi, Mohammed Alwan al-Jumaily and others.

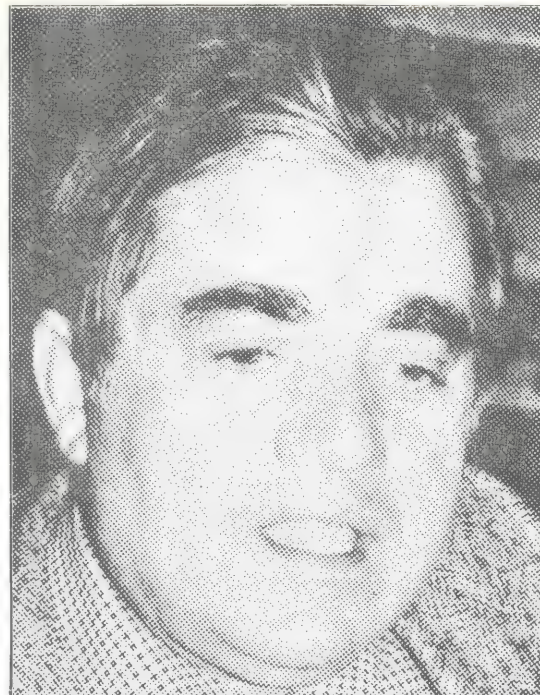
Sometimes, aesthetic, individualistic care outweighed the anxiety for social change, as is the case with the works of Mohammed Roznamchi, Nizar Salim and Nizar Abass, whose stories were a blend of romanticism, symbolism and existentialism.

The stories written in the 1950s were marked by social empathy to an extent that made political issues their trade mark. In a country governed by a semi-feudal, surrogate and monarchical regime, the writers began to demand, though





Ghazi al-Abadi &gt;&gt;



indirectly, a drastic social change to transform Iraq from a backward state to a developed country.

The much-sought-after change acquired a firm basis with the outbreak of the July 14, 1958 Revolution, which meant a profound social and economic change striking at the roots of Iraqi society. This change was supposed to create a new climate whereby a direct influence may be observed in the technique and vision of story writers. However, the following course reduced such an influence to the minimum. New complexities and political conflicts emerged and the impact of the Revolution was hampered by the dictatorship established by the new regime.

In the year that followed the 1958 Revolution a new generation of writers was born. This generation was contemporary to the outbreak of the Revolution and its setbacks. They were influenced by volatile events that had left an imprint on their literary experiment.

The writers of the 1960s lived in a highly complex political situation which deepened their sense of disappointment and defeat, leading them, eventually, to review many values and axioms and seek new values and experiments. The events led to the creation of a new mode of thinking: writers of this generation were dominated by personal concerns rather than community cares. They were more concerned now with aesthetic aspects and technical experimentation than intellectual or social precepts.

Young writers sought a new recourse in the inner world of man, a depressed and isolated entity from the aggregate movement of social change. Some became prisoners of abstraction and introversion.

This may clearly be seen in the works of a number of those writers of the 1960s such as Jalil al-Qaisi, Abdul Rahman al-Rubai', Sargon Paulis, Juma' al-Lami, Ahmed Khalaf, Mousa Kreidi, Mohammed Abdul Majid, Abdul Sattar Nasser, Muhsin al-Khafaji, A'id Khisbak, Yousif al-Haidari, Abdul Ilah Abdul Razzaq and others.

The preoccupation of those writers with technical and aesthetic aspects of the story initiated an important development which put the Iraqi story on a par with other advanced Arab arts.

However, some of those writers remained faithful to the traditions of realistic art opening the path to a "new realism". Instances of this trend may be detected in the writings of

Mohammed Khudhayir, Khudhayir Abdul Amir, Ghazi al-Abadi, Muwafaq Khidhir, Burhan al-Khatib, Fahd al-Asadi, and Abdul Razzak al-Muttalibi. A few writers of the 1950s may be also referred to here, for example, Faud al-Tikarli, Ghanim al-Dabbagh and Mahmoud al-Dhahir.

The developments in the late 1960s had a great impact on story-writers. The June 5, 1967 Arab-Israeli war was a setback which uncovered the weaknesses of backward ideologies in the Arab world. This setback made Iraqi story-writers seek new committed and conscious stands.

The July 17, 1968 Revolution in Iraq marked a major shift to a new path wherein the story-writers were now able to get rid of the nightmare obscuring their vision in the previous eras of regression, and pessimism. The Revolution realised great and influential transformations in the various social phenomena.

New names emerged and writers started to redress the imbalance created by former trends. Their writing now had a wider, more humanitarian scope in a new, healthy climate.

The names of writers of this era are too many to recount but examples may be seen in the writings of Fadhil Al-Rubai', Amjad Tawfiq, Sa'd al-Bazzaz, Latif Nassir, May Mudhaffar, Najman Yassin, Hamid al-Hiti and others.

Writers of the 1970s managed to incorporate the rich experience of their predecessors with the most important of new trends in story-writing on both Arab and international levels. Stories written in this period were characterised by delicate concern for the daily social reality. The so-called "daily life stories" were represented in the writings of Fadhil al-Rubai', Ibrahim Ahmed, Jihad Majid and Khalid Habib al-Rawi.

Special attention was paid to social development in the countryside. Best examples of this may be seen in the writings of Hamid Nassir el-Jallawi, Amjad Tawfiq, Faisal Hashim, Abdul Jalil al-Mayah and Kadhim al-Ahmedi.

Stories of this period were characterised by maturity of approach, variety of modes of expression and power of structure while retaining the aesthetic values of former eras. In their interaction with social change, the writers of the 1970s did not remain naive but became critical of the impediments to change in a manner that was objective, sincere and active.

Translated by Salim Shamoun





Scene from *Mismar Juha* (Juha's Nail) performed by the Modern Theatre Company

## Iraqi theatre in the 1950s : a decade of change

■ By Sami Abdul Hamid

The early 1950s witnessed a tangible change in the course of theatre in Iraq. The Theatre Department at the Institute of Fine Arts began to present some theatrical productions and also there came into existence new theatrical groups with well-defined aims. The dramatic works presented by the Theatre Department were closely linked with the aspirations and sufferings of the Iraqi people at the time.

Prior to that, the theatre had been confined to stage performances presented by dramatic groups; melodramas by some people in places not frequented by theatre fans, and plays presented by the Theatre Department.

The theatre was considered merely a source of cheap entertainment. Earlier, there had been an obvious dearth of serious theatrical productions despite some talent among Fine Arts Institute graduates and some veteran actors.

All those, however, hovered between vitality and stagnation. Apart from the writings of Safa' Mustafa, Salim Butti and Nadhim al-Attraqchi, most plays presented earlier were either translations or adaptations of Western works such as those of Shakespeare or Moliere.

Translations of plays such as Dumas' *La Dame aux Camélias* and Boucicault's *Louis XI* came mainly from Egypt



and Lebanon. The Fine Arts Institute's productions were, however, restricted to parts of some classical plays, Ahmed Shawqi's drama works and some popular plays written by the Institute's students themselves under the supervision of Haqi al-Shibli.

Iraqi theatre had not acquired its own personality before the 1950s, except that theatrical activities were associated with the anti-imperialist national movement. This trend was given up but re-adopted in the early 1950s.

Iraqi theatrical production was dominated by Egyptian drama seen by Iraqis during Egyptian groups' visits to Iraq. Iraqis imitated Egyptian direction, decor and performance. The direction lacked creativity; the decor depended to a large extent on painted views; costumes lacked historical accuracy, while acting was unnatural and exaggerated.

The actors were, furthermore, not familiar with advanced stage techniques, and were ignorant of theories world-wide, such as Stanislavsky's theories and new trends such as those inspired by neo-Platonists like Grieg, Meyerhold, Reinhardt and others.

There were very few available translations explaining these schools of thought and Iraqi dramatists had no access to information apart from Haqi al-Shibli's lectures when he returned from Egypt and France.

The Fine Arts Institute's Theatre Department was closed in 1949 but re-opened the same year. In the years that followed, a number of other high institutes' students and graduates, like Yousif al-Ani, Badri Hassoun Farid, Ali Dawood and Sami Abdul Hamid joined the Department. They soon discovered that the methods used in teaching and theatrical production were obsolete and they strove to follow up the latest developments. They began a constant quest for whatever publications available: Egyptian and Lebanese publications on international theatre. They went on to translate articles and books on theatre.

These pioneer dramatists agitated for a change in teaching methods at the Institute, and for replacing the old with the new, linking the theatre with social movement. Their teacher, Ibrahim Jalal, provided the impetus for their demands.

The basis of those pioneers' argument was that the theatre must not be merely a means of entertainment as such but rather a means of promoting public awareness. No sooner had they discovered that the Institute's confines could not cope with their wide objectives — communicating with the public — than they decided to set up a special theatre group that would correspond with their aspirations. So the Modern Theatre Company was born.

### The Modern Theatre Company

In early 1952, Ibrahim Jalal was licenced by the then Ministry of Social Affairs — licences these days are granted by the Ministry of Information and Culture — to set up a new theatre company which was named The Modern Theatre Company.

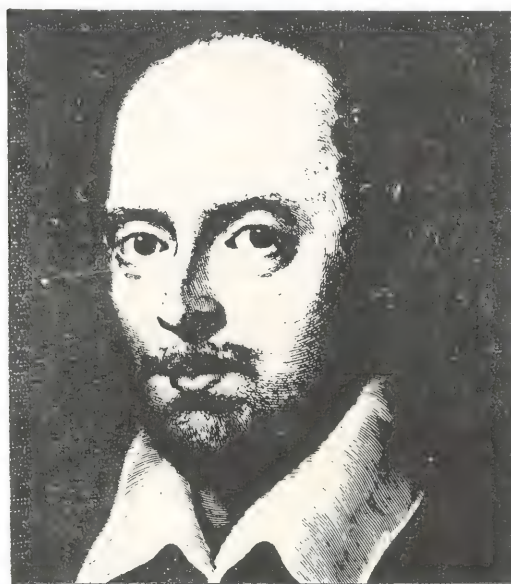
The Company's first administrative body comprised Yousif al-Ani, Abdul Hamid Qassim, Mohammed al-Qaissi, Yaqoub al-Amin and Majid al-Azzawi. The theatrical activities of the Company were presented in cooperation with the then al-Nida' al-Ichima'i (The Social Call) Society, a cultural charity organization run by a group of university professors.

The Company set up headquarters in a building beside the Tigris, in Aadhamiya area in Baghdad.

Early productions of the Modern Theatre Company were a series of short popular plays written by Yousif al-Ani and parts of Shakespeare's *Othello* which were directed by Ibrahim Jalal.

The Company used to meet at the Society's gardens and later built a mud-and-brick stage to present their works. Its members, however, felt an urgent need for a place where the Company could rehearse and meet during winter time. An agreement was therefore reached with the Society to combat social diseases to allow the Company to use its premises.

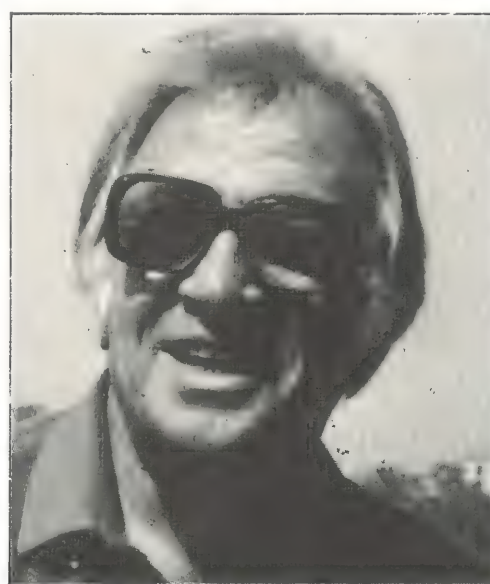
Having solved this problem, the Company set out to present



William Shakespeare



Haqi al-Shibli



Ibrahim Jalal





Azadouhi Samuel

The Modern  
Theatre Company



a number of plays namely *Ras al-Shilila* (The Beginning of the Thread), *Tu'mur Beg* (Yes, Sir) and *Awdat al-Muhathab* (Return of the Intellectual). The first two were by Yousif al-Ani, the last by Shihab al-Qasab, who died in the early 1950s.

The Modern Theatre Company presented the first two works, *Tu'mur Beg* (Yes, Sir) and *Maku Shughul* (No Job), directed by Jassim al-Uboudi, after his return from the United States, when he assumed technical administration of the Company following the departure of Ibrahim Jalal to Italy. Both plays were by Yousif al-Ani.

For the first time, al-Uboudi applied Stanislavsky's method, based on a careful analysis of the play's motives. Al-Uboudi employed dramatic realism, simple decor, and stage movement only when justified.

After his return from Italy in 1956, Ibrahim Jalal presented two plays which were then considered significant in the theatre. The first was *The Swan Song* by Chekhov, with a cast consisting of Sami Hamid and Yousif al-Ani. The decor was designed by Ismail al-Sheikhli. The second play was *Sit Darahim* (Six Dirhams) by Yousif al-Ani in which the leading roles were played by Abdul Rahman Behjat, Yousif al-Ani, Abdul Hamid Qassim, Azadouhi Samuel and Abdul Majid al-Azzawi. In these two plays, audio-visual and movement effects were incorporated and stress was laid on concord between costumes, decor and make-up.

The first play stirred up controversy in arts circles concerned with regard to its validity for stage presentation considering its reliance on one leading character and a single supplementary one.

The Company, nonetheless, detected in the play's theme content appropriate to furthering the Company's objectives in radically converting the stand of Society. It tackled the case of a renowned actor who, when he got old, lost his public. Despite this bitter experience, this actor was determined to press

ahead with his career and use his talents.

The play was viewed by some as a qualitative stride in the Modern Theatre Company's production in which symbolic decor and a two-man performance succeeded in rivetting the attention of the audience for more than an hour and a half. The Company later had to get help from another society, the then Iraqi Women's Federation to present the play.

The Modern Theatre Company, as with other groups, continued counting on charities and social clubs to by-pass censorship on the texts of its plays. The last of these societies which the Company appealed to was the Railway Club, when authorities banned the Company from presenting plays during the British-French-Israeli aggression against Egypt in 1956.

In order to cast light on the nature of the Company's activities, a reference ought to be made to an article written by Yousif al-Ani in the Iraqi magazine *Cinema* in December 1955. In that article, al-Ani stated that texts for stage were selected by a special commission inside the Company. In its work, the commission had to make sure that the number of actors in any play must be proportionate with the local membership of the Company. The commission was also assigned with the task of solving the problem posed by the scarcity of actresses which constituted a major stumbling-block in the way of the theatrical movement in Iraq as a whole.

Al-Ani urged Iraqi women to try to convince their families that acting is an honourable career which could contribute to social development and give guidance to all generations. The Company's work set a precedent in arousing the collective spirit in securing the elements of stage production (actors, decor, etc.).

#### The Popular Theatre Company

The Popular Theatre Company was formed in the mid-1940s by a group of Fine Arts Institute's graduates in the forefront of



whom were Abdul Karim Hadi, Ibrahim Jalal, Ja'far al-Sa'di and Abdul Jabbar Tawfiq Wali. After presenting its first production, a play by Victorien Sardou, the Company halted its activities because of conflicting views among its members.

In 1956, al-Sa'di managed to win over some of the Company and gave it new life. Having taken the Kadhimiya (Baghdad) Local Hall as headquarters, the Company presented *Fulus* (Money) by a Turkish playwright. It was directed by Ja'far al-Sa'di himself. The second play was *Arid A'ish* (I Want to Live), written by Ibrahim al-Hindawi and directed by al-Sa'di.

These two plays won great popularity. The Company had earlier performed *The Fatal Kiss*, a melodrama from the past. It also performed *Al-Lis Wal Shurti* (The Thief and the Policeman), written and directed by Badri Hassoun Farid.

The nature and technique of this Company's activity did not differ much from that of The Modern Theatre Company except for some details. Both had their own fans.

### Other theatrical companies

Although some other companies were licenced, they never carried out activities with clear-cut objectives. Very often, those holding licences used to loan them to others. In late 1956, after deserting the Modern Theatre Company, Jassim al-Uboudi procured a licence to form a company, the Free Theatre Company which soon set about presenting performances to the public.

### The Fine Arts Institute

The Fine Arts Institute's Theatre Department continued presenting only one or two performances at most every year. When Ibrahim Jalal headed the Department, he attracted many theatre fans. Soon after Haqi al-Shibili had taken over, he presented Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* in which most of the Department's students and teachers took part. It was a mature work containing all requirements for success, including magnificent decor, costumes and good acting.

The director of the play at the time supplemented the play with an additional act whereby Octavius was crowned as Rome's Caesar in order to make the presentation of the play coincide with the coronation of King Feisal II of Iraq.

Later, al-Shibli directed Tawfiq al-Hakim's *Scheherazade*, adding some dialogue to the scene of *Hashashin* (hashish addicts) with a view to attracting a bigger audience. With the new techniques used in those two plays, al-Shibli had departed from the tradition of presenting acts of famous plays or the one-act play.

On his return, Jassim al-Uboudi joined the Institute's teaching staff and presented his first theatrical work, Emmanuel Robles' *The Truth is Dead*. It was a play with a radical theme of sentimental philosophy. In that play, al-Uboudi applied the theatrical theories he learnt at the Goodman Institute in Chicago. He utilised a fully realistic decor and costumes and strove to make the characters convincing and real.

When drawing a comparison between the early works of Haqi al-Shibili, Ibrahim Jalal and Jassim al-Uboudi, it is clear that plays of al-Shibili were traditional in form and liberal in content, while those of Jalal were innovative in form and



Al-Shibli at the Fine Arts Institute



Yousif al-Ani (L) and Sami Abdul Hamid

committed in content, while al-Uboudi's bore the touch of scientific form and committed content.

### Features of Iraqi Theatre in the 1950s

Some radical changes occurred in Iraqi theatre in the 1950s, prior to the 1958 Revolution, the most prominent of which can be summed up as follows:

1. More stress was put on Iraqi plays that tackled problems of Iraqi daily life to gain more fans and to give Iraqi theatre a character of its own.

In an article in *Cinema* magazine in the mid-1950s, Abdulla Hassan wrote that the most outstanding indication of the progress made by the Iraqi theatre was the emergence of the pure Iraqi play. By "pure" he meant that translated plays formed no part of its form or content.

Plays like *Tu'mur Beg*, (Yes, Sir) *Ras al-Shilila*, (The Beginning of the Thread), *Maku Shughul* (No Job) and *Sit Darahim* (Six Dirhams) all bore the imprint of genuine Iraqi theatre, though some still lacked the elements of dramatic construction and integration. The content, however, mirrored



the prevailing social situation and the aspirations of the people to change the backward social and political systems of the time. They also tried to pinpoint the most important problems.

2. The quest for seriousness in the techniques of presentation, the construction of character and performance as dramatists for quite a long time literally followed the example set by visiting Egyptian companies. The approach learned from their teacher, Haqi al-Shibli, based on the Egyptian and French theatre, adopted a traditional way of tackling direction. It also relied on the superficial outlook of a character at the expense of analysis of the internal action, relationship and conflict among the characters. That same approach also depended on exaggeration in acting. All this accounts for the way new dramatists rejected the performance of Yousif Wahbi's Company in Baghdad on the grounds that the Company was an image of the obsolete.

3. The world's newly-introduced theatrical theories and trends, which had not yet arrived in Iraq were applied to theatrical texts and direction. In the aforementioned article in *Cinema* magazine, Abdul Hassan stated that some dramatists had started studying various theatrical trends. There was more concentration on realism in theatre and the magazine made a good contribution by acquainting Iraqi dramatists with various new theatrical trends. The magazine was the first to put out a translation of a book on Stanislavsky's method.

4. The attempt to bring about a change in Society's attitude towards theatre and actors, especially women. Theatre groups recruited some young, enlightened players of good social prestige in a bid to eliminate long-standing snobbish attitudes towards the theatre.

5. Retaining the element of amateur theatre by not shifting to professionalism. The majority of theatre companies' members were civil servants and employees who practised stage activities after office hours. This can be attributed to the lack of belief that acting could secure their livelihood.

6. The reliance on some renowned artists like Jawad Salim, Fa'iq Hassan and Ismail al-Sheikhli for stage decor, costumes and make-up.



Ja'far al-Sa'di

الموسم الفني للتمثيل  
بمناسبة عيد تنويع حفرة صاحب الجلالة الملك العظيم  
تحت رعاية معالي وزير المعارف  
معهد الفنون الجميلة  
فرع التمثيل  
يقدم لأول مرة - ولمدة اسبوع كامل  
- الرواية التاريخية العالمة -  
يوليوس قيصر  
- تراجمي -  
خمس فصول سبعة مناظر  
تأليف : ولیم شكبير  
ترجمة : سامي الجريديني  
إخراج : حمى السيل  
من مساء الخميس ٢٨ مايس سنة ١٩٥٣  
الى مساء الخميس ٤ حزيران سنة ١٩٥٣

Brochure of *Julius Caesar*, presented by the Fine Arts Institut in 1953

7. There was a tendency among a number of dramatists after their return from abroad to specialize in direction. Well-known examples are Ibrahim Jalal, Ja'far al-Sa'di, Jassim al-Uboudi and Behnam Mikha'il.

8. The whole process of stage performance by the company was financed by the members themselves. Friends helped to alleviate financial troubles when revenue from performances failed. Companies were also unable to set a proper schedule for their programmes.

9. Preserving the principle of adaptation from Western theatre as an indispensable source, thanks to the fact that Western theatre was richer in deep-rooted traditions. It did not occur to Iraqi dramatists at that time to turn to Arab heritage as even a richer source which could provide outstanding themes as is the case nowadays.

10. Facing up to the despotic rule of the time. Most dramatists were active nationalists who, in one way or another, took part in the national movement. This explains why the authorities were sceptical about those dramatists and subsequently tried to put obstacles in their way. On some occasions this amounted to banning their productions.

Translated by Ibrahim J. Ibrahim





Jawad Salim. *Girl with a Bird*. Oil.

## *When the Curtain Rose for the Baghdad Modern Art Group*

Whenever I recall the period in which our Group came into existence I feel a sense of pride. At that time I had just finished my study at the Teachers' College. It was 1948. I was living in Baghdad while my place of work was in the town of Ba'qouba, some 55 kilometres east of Baghdad. I was trained as a teacher and I had to shuttle between Baghdad and Ba'qouba every day.

During this period, however, and out of personal interest and ambition, despite difficult work conditions, I joined the evening classes of the Fine Arts Institute to study painting. My real encouragement came from my mother, who, after my father's death, remained my friend and mentor. I had to study in the bus on my way to work or going home, early or late. Despite that, I managed to strike a balance between teaching in Ba'qouba, studying at the Fine Arts Institute and meeting friends in the evening at the Brazilian Cafe or at Yassin Coffee-shop in Baghdad.

An important event of my life was meeting and later making friends with a number of lecturers and fellow students at the Institute who later became well-known artists. Some of them even pioneered the modern art movement in Iraq. Among them were Mohammed Ghani Hikmet who was teaching sculpture, Jawad Salim and Mohammed al-Hasani who used to teach painting and sculpture, and others such as Ali al-Sha'lan, Khalid al-Kishtini, Rasoul Alwan, Henry Zvovda, Boghos Bablonian and Ihsan al-Mala'ika who were, like me, students of Fa'iq Hassan, master of Iraqi painting.

A special friendship developed between Jawad Salim and myself. I found him to be a magnificent example of an Iraqi or even a world artist. Also, a special relationship grew with Atta Sabri and Faiq Hassan, who I consider to be the spiritual leaders of our generation.

Outside the Institute and on the outskirts of Baghdad, a strong cultural and human tie linked me with Nizar Salim and



Salman Shukur, the chief musician of Baghdad after al-Sharif Muhi al-Deen and Munir Allah Werdi. I got to know Fuad Ridha and Farid Allah Werdi, who later became my closest friends following my return from Paris, where I had continued my higher education.

We were regular customers of Yassin Coffee-shop, which was situated in the South Gate area of Baghdad, overlooking the river Tigris. That colourful picture is still vivid in my mind. The long beach had changing huts for swimmers. Under the golden rays of the setting sun, young boys and girls wandered about, enjoying the reflection of the sun on the waters.

At the time, we used to go to that coffee-shop every evening after study at the Institute was over. There were other friends whom we used to meet there, such as Talib al-Gailani, Ahmed al-Sheikhli and Sabih al-Ani, Abdul Majeed al-Wandawi, a journalist, Hussein Mardan, Kadhim Jawad and Buland al-Haidari, all brilliant poets. At those daily gatherings we used to discuss current events and political situation briefly and then move on to the art movement in general. With the benefit of hindsight I can say now that Yassin Coffee-shop was a great intellectual laboratory, in which the blueprints of most of our individual and collective projects took shape. A group without name or identity including painters, journalists, lawyers, musicians, politicians, poets, novelists and even laymen gathered every day to exchange ideas and talk about the future.

This simple coffee-shop was a kind of school for us in which we developed our ideas and perceptions and plans. It also became a sort of starting point which witnessed the launching of many of our adventures. A number of great poems by Buland al-Haidari, Hussein Mardan, Kadhim Jawad and later Badr Shakir al-Sayyab saw the light for the first time in Yassin Coffee-shop.

I used to have discussions about modern art with Fadhil Abbas and Rasoul Alwan. These discussions did not usually arrive at any conclusion, but I used to discover new meanings



Jawad Salim in his atelier



Maquette for the Unknown Political Prisoner by Jawad Salim





Lorna Salim. *The Smokers*. Oil

which would later help me in my work on the revival of art in Iraq.

These memories are part of any discussion about the founding of the Baghdad Group. They form, I believe, the intellectual infrastructure of the entire experiment. For me, the daily journey to and from a tiring job, followed by many hours of hard work as a student at the Institute and then the relaxing evening hours on the banks of the Tigris provided me with the opportunity for collective artistic theorization, and later allowed me to discuss it with Jawad Salim.

I could have led an ordinary life, concentrating on a job and lazy afternoons at home. But I was not that type. Even in the few hours left after an eventful day, I mentally used to feel the need to explore the unknown. Our generation was carrying the burden of a human and intellectual movement of whose value we were unaware at the time. It was the crisis of Mesopotamian thought in the 1950s, a crisis caused by the conflict between the theoretical knowledge from books and

the adventure of embarking on a new unknown future through experiment, trial and error.

In the period preceding my stay in Paris for study (1948-1955) I became convinced that the reality of science is not to be gained wholly from the pages of books, but should rather be obtained by experiment. Therefore, I became deeply involved in my personal adventures and in my relations and artistic experiments. I also became a heavy smoker and drinker and had a number of affairs. In a word, I tried to rediscover myself through involvement in life and to find myself through others.

However, after a while I discovered that my attempts had gone astray and I was on the verge of falling into the trap of living a superficial and meaningless life. In 1958 I was reawakened after a bout of self-indulgence. I managed to regain control of my will and to concentrate my experiments on myself instead of others, and thus I rejected cigarettes,





Jawad Salim with a relief

alcohol and women and succeeded in reconstructing my personality from within.

The important thing about this period was that my artistic personality eventually developed and I became prepared for the future. A decisive factor was the daily transformation I had to undergo, changing from being a teacher in the morning, a student in the afternoon, and customer of a coffee-shop in the evening.

At the Fine Arts Institute I continued painting as I used to during my high school study. I also concentrated on reading biographies of prominent artists. I remember a significant decision which I had to make in that period. I said to myself: "The history of art is very long. Why should not I start from a reasonable point?" I decided to begin with Impressionism and began to paint as an Impressionist. I was justifying overlooking the Renaissance period on the grounds that I was ignoring the past in favour of the present, in whose construction I was involved. It was a kind of "individual renaissance" which would liberate my personal civilisation from the backwardness of ages. And as an artist rather than a painter, I decided to rediscover Islamic and local arts.

This happened at a time when my relation with Jawad Salim was still not close. When I started as an art student in 1951 I discovered how hard I had to work, if I wanted to fulfil all my

dreams. My choice of impressionism, it may be said, was a bridge for crossing, not a starting point.

I do not exactly remember how I came to know Jawad Salim. It might have happened accidentally. He was a well-known artist and I was still at the beginning of my artistic career. Perhaps it was Buland al-Haidari who introduced us as he was a friend of us both. But I do remember that I was greatly impressed as I listened to him for the first time talking about primitive art at the Fine Arts Institute.

He was talking in standard Arabic, using from time to time an expression or a word from colloquial Arabic. When he was trying to describe the way primitive man used to paint, we saw his suffering as he sought a suitable word. Big drops of sweat gathered on his forehead, and finally he said in a low voice: "Primitive man used to scribble on the walls of the caves". He said "scribble" in greatest simplicity. And up to now I can feel the amount of suffering which he used to go through to express his emotions. It was a true reflection of man's agony in choosing the right words and the right means of expressing his thoughts and intentions and even of his self-confidence.

This became later the main motive of our respect for this man when we came to know his work. He could be felt behind the elegance of colours and the tenderness of lines as well as he could be identified through the "smoothness" of his sculptures. We, his friends and students, could easily notice the agony and suffering which he was experiencing when he was trying to talk to us about primitive art, for example. He never appeared on the surface of his works; he penetrated deep inside them.

In 1948 there were big demonstrations in Baghdad followed by confrontations between police and demonstrators in what became to be known as the "Battle of the Bridge". Those demonstrations were a spontaneous reaction by the public against the then Portsmouth Treaty between Iraq and Great Britain. As a result, the Government gave in and the Prime Minister resigned and the Treaty was nullified. These events had a great impact on our social consciousness and this was clearly reflected later on in our paintings. I am not sure whether Jawad and I talked about these demonstrations but I do remember we exchanged views on how artistic groups were formed and came into existence.

Friends of Art, of which Jawad was a founder, was a melting pot in which the past and the future of Iraqi art merged. It was the first serious step towards uniting the individual efforts of the artists. The Pioneers which came after the Friends of Art showed that the Iraqi artist's commitment to his art was as great as that of any European artist. Our generation thus became aware of the human role of the artist and his right to justify his beliefs and thoughts and therefore the road was clear for us and for our leader, Jawad Salim, to think about setting up a new group.

I did not know as many people as Jawad did. My close friends were Mohammed al-Hassani, Fadhil Abbas and later Ali al-Sha'lan, Mohammed Ghani Hikmet and Khalil al-Ward who all became members of the Baghdad Group.

But through Jawad Salim I met Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, Mahmoud Sabri and Kahtan Abdulla Awni. Thus, our Group was not set up as a result of ties of friendship as was the case with The Pioneers.

The new dimension here was the artistic commitment itself. We did not appear as an amateur group because we were painters already. The Pioneers used to go away from the city





Jawad Salim lecturing

of the generation of the fifties.

In addition, there was another important root which took part in nourishing the idea of setting up such a Group. This root was the experiment of the revolution which was taking place in Arabic poetry. As I mentioned before, the main theme of our discussions when we used to meet at Yassin Coffee-shop was to catch up with the advancing time through literature and arts.

This modest spot was the scene of endless debates and argument between the pioneers of modern poetry such as Buland al-Haidari, Badr Shakir al-Sayyab and Abdul Wahab al-Bayati. But it was Buland who raised this new trend in Arabic literature to the level of critical consciousness of arts. As a friend of Jawad Salim and Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, Buland developed a sense of appreciation and criticism of art which enabled him to take part vigorously in moving forward any attempt in renovating painting styles and schools in Iraq. Jawad Salim used to listen to him carefully and modify his opinions, accordingly when necessary. As there were attempts to break the traditional structure of Arabic poetry there was also the endeavour to bring about new styles and concepts in painting and this led to a breakthrough towards a genuine art renovation.

The Baghdad Group in its attempts to break free from the influence of European art benefited from the poets who were trying to develop their revolutionary measures in the structure of Arabic poetry. We, the painters and sculptors, were also hoping to establish our own measures. And this was centred on trying to give prominence to "localism" through an artistic work of worldwide value. And this is what we have been trying to achieve ever since we started working together.

with the intention of painting and enjoying music and having fun, while our Group's main concern was to look for a collective artistic identity. Therefore, the Baghdad Group was a social and intellectual necessity realised in art and it was closely linked to our culture and heritage. And this necessity convinced us and Jawad Salim that we should concentrate on so-called "localism" and thus we made our departure from the concepts laid down by The Pioneers. This was behind our decision to concentrate on or to go back to our heritage.

Perhaps as a result of my teaching career I became a strong supporter of collective work to confront the low ebb surrounding the Iraqi and Arab artist in the face of cultural colonialism of our country.

It was the spring of 1951. For Mohammed al-Hasani and me there were many reasons to think about the formation of a new artistic group. One day we made a suggestion about that to Jawad Salim. After a long debate about the nature and structure of such a group, we made a decision to set up the Baghdad Modern Art Group, a designation which was suggested by Jawad Salim himself.

The period before our first collective exhibition was full of hopes. We were aware of our responsibilities, though we did not know the consequences or the limits of such responsibilities. But once more it can be said now that our Group became a source of inspiration for ourselves and other Iraqi artists from the very beginning of its appearance and is so, even up to the present time. The foundation of the Group was the first stone to be laid in the now prosperous Iraqi, even Arab art movement. Thus came into existence the Baghdad Group as a reflection of the flourishing social and cultural consciousness



Shakir Hassan Al Sa'id at the first meeting of the group (1951).



Our first exhibition was really a starting point as well as an opportunity for some of us to know each other. I reckon my relationship with Jabra Ibrahima Jabra, Kahtan Abdulla Awni and Mahmoud Sabri started from that time.

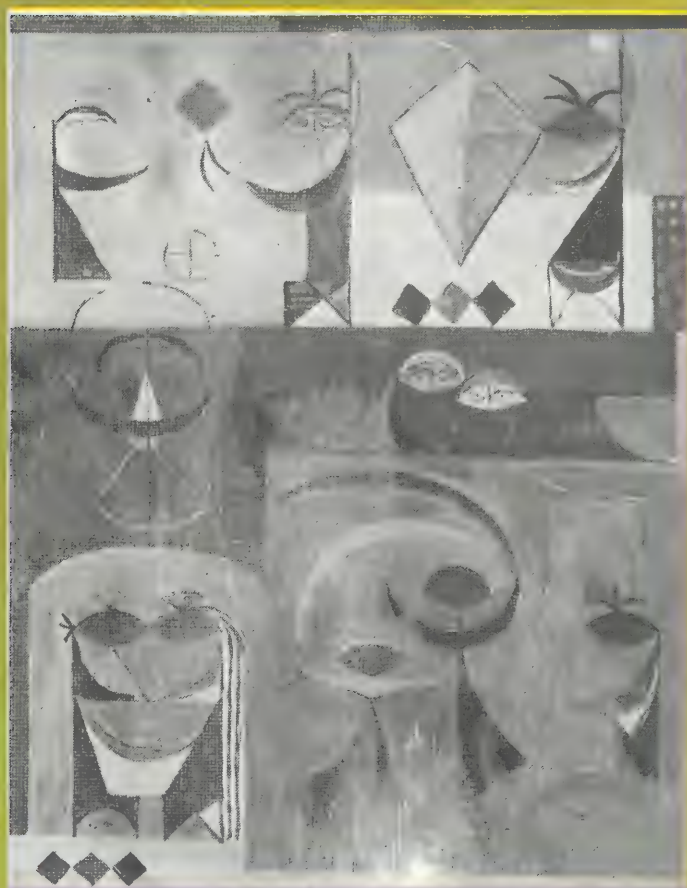
The participants in the first exhibition were Jawad Salim, Lorna Salim, Mohammed al-Hasani, Kahtan Abdulla Awni, Nizar Ali Jawdat, Richard Kaniada, Mahmoud Sabri and myself. It was a great success.

In 1953, when we held our second exhibition, a number of new faces joined us. Naziha Salim, who had just returned from Paris after finishing her study, Rasoul Alwan, Hafidh al-Duroubi, Mohammed Ghani Hikmet and Henry Lewis were the first batch. Then in 1954, Boghos Bablonian, Tareq Madhlum, Faraj Abbo, Khalid al-Rahal, Khalil al-Ward and Ali Sha'lan joined the Group raising the number of members to sixteen painters and sculptors in just three years after its formation.

Our appearance was a surprise for art lovers whose ultimate wish was to see the exhibitions organised by the Friends of Art or the Pioneers. We, or at least some of us, felt that we had a message to convey and that we were not just a batch of whimsical artists wishing to show off.

It strikes me now that Jawad Salim was feeling a great responsibility to break away from the Pioneers. He was finally given the choice to stay with them or to leave and he decided to leave. Perhaps the difference in approach was a main factor. He did not share with them the view of painting as an amateur but as a professional. There was also Fa'iq Hassan's leadership of the Pioneers and, as is often said, two bosses cannot get on well with each other.

Therefore, the circumstances were appropriate. There was



Jawad Salim. *Children's Games*. Oil



Shakir Hassan Al Sa'id with a group of friends in Hilla

our intention to establish a collective artistic work. Then there was the determination of some young artists to show off, and finally, Jawad's perception of the future of art movement in Iraq. All these factors contributed to the dialogue which later developed between the Baghdad Group and the Pioneers, which happened to emerge simultaneously. The art movement in Iraq then began to move, as the two opposing poles provided a great impetus.

The attitude of Jawad Salim expressed how deeply he believed in the future of art in Iraq. He also believed that a great deal of responsibility should be borne by the artist who should produce worthwhile works and at the same time prepare and educate the public. He blamed some commercial galleries for the shallow taste of the public. He never approved of the idea of offering the public what they want, as he considered this a great threat to the artistic taste of the public and to the artist himself, as this trend would spoil his innocence. Such works, he believed, would not contribute in developing the art movement. Furthermore, it would give a false example of creativity and modernism. He used to say repeatedly: "I don't believe in 'must' or 'should' said by this or that. I believe in artistic work as a phenomenon."

From this perspective Jawad Salim and the rest of us never fell into the trap of striving for individual gains. We were after collective gains for artistic work and for the Iraqi public as well, who would be influenced by the nature of the works they encountered.

I realised that he was concerned with the idea of finding new bases for artistic appreciation and by that he definitely did not mean modernism *per se*. This was the reason that led him, as





The group at their second exhibition

a sculptor, to produce his famous *Liberty Monument* in a less modern style than he could have done. I remember asking him before his death about what prompted him to deal with this subject in this style. His answer was that the subject was presented to the public. I then realised that the nature of the subject plays a great part in the nature of the artistic structure as a whole. The artist who makes humanity his subject cannot be more adventurous than going beyond human styles.

From the very beginning our Group undertook a dual function: to help the artist establish an artistic and intellectual vision derived from Arab and local civilisations, and to assist the public to attain a contemporary and realistic appreciation of artistic works in general, including our own. In a word, the Group was bent on encouraging modern styles in work and spreading appreciation, and although we were not fully aware of our task, it finally paid off.

Ever since our first exhibition, modern art lovers flocked to see our works. It seems that the Pioneers before us had prepared such an audience. However, we started from the beginning to call for and implement the theme under which we established our Group. It was, in brief, an attempt to express local features through modernism. This occurred not through extending our exhibits, which were to some extent influenced by European trends, but through discussions which took place between ourselves and the public, art critics and journalists.

Our mission, as explained before, was on the one hand to produce artistic works of local features and modern styles and on the other to attempt to prepare and educate the public in Baghdad at first and later in Iraq to be able to surmount their position toward modern art in favour of modern local art.

On the first score, we achieved success to a great extent, but the second task was and still is difficult to achieve. Perhaps, we were trying to reenact the experiment of the "Blue Cavalier" as happened in German art at the beginning of the 20th century, with the addition of the awareness which was derived from our heritage.

Jawad Salim died in 1961. Before that date, I went to Paris in 1955 as did Mohammed al-Hasani, Mohammed Ghani Hikmet, Khalid al-Rahhal and Boghos Bablonian. However, our Group continued to grow. Until 1957, new faces joined us. They included Nizar Salim, Abdul Rahman al-Gailani, Ian Old, Miran al-Sa'di and in the following year Ismail Fattah, Ilfrid al-Rahhal (Khalid's first wife), Valentinos Klakombos and Ghalib Nahi. While others quitted, for example, Hafidh al-Duroubi who set up his Impressionists' Group and Mahmoud Sabri who, after our first exhibition, preferred to go back to the Pioneers. However, throughout the 1960s we fully shouldered our responsibilities. In the early 1970s, other

artists such as Mohammed Arif, Abdul Rahim al-Wakil, Ibrahim al-Abdali, Salman Abbas and Fuad Jihad joined the Group.

I remember all the details of the day when the Group was formed. It was the spring of 1951, a Thursday evening in mid-April. We collected our work in a certain place in Baghdad and Jawad undertook to carry the exhibits in his pick-up. We crossed the College of Law unnoticed. There were Mohammed al-Hasani, Fadhil Abbas, Jawad Salim and myself in the car. After driving along al-Rashid Street we reached our destination in Bab el-Sharqi (The South Gate). We hung our paintings in a hall at the former Museum of Costumes near the present-day al-Jumhuriya Bridge. There we met with the late Kahtan Abdulla Awni and Mahmoud Sabri. We prepared the exhibition with great enthusiasm. We were aware of the size and limits of the responsibility with which we were entrusted toward our country, its history and civilisation and toward the whole world and humanity.

The opening ceremony on the next day was marvellous. There were people from all walks of life. Perhaps the type of the public in the 1950s was unique. They were all mellowed with circumstances surrounding the 1948 nationalist movement and they tried to compensate for their restricted political freedoms through the arts. They came by the hundred, the lawyer, the businessman, the musician, students, journalists, politicians and foreigners as well. Some names which I still remember included Hussein Jamil, the well-known lawyer, Ahmad Kattan, the journalist, Dr Khalil al-Shabandar and the poets Adnan al-Rawi and Abdul Qadir al-Nasiri who later criticised the exhibition in local papers.

There were also Hussein Mardan, Buland al-Haidari, Farid Allah Werdi and his brother Munir Allah Werdi, the engineer.

After opening the exhibition, Jawad Salim delivered a lecture in the gardens of the museum about art and the public and then the first statement of the Group was read. Then a concert was presented by Munir Allah Werdi (clarinet), Wartan Manokian (first violin), Dr Sami Sheikh Qassim, (second violin), Fuad Ridha (viola) and Agob Kabumchian (cello) who were either professors or students at the Fine Arts Institute. It was a really magnificent celebration.

I am not sure whether I have been relating these memories objectively or not. One thing, however, I am certain about and history will prove how correct I am in saying that the appearance of the Baghdad Modern Art Group in the early 1950s represented a new and shining beginning for contemporary Iraqi art and for our artistic personality through the ages.

Translated by Hadi al-Taie

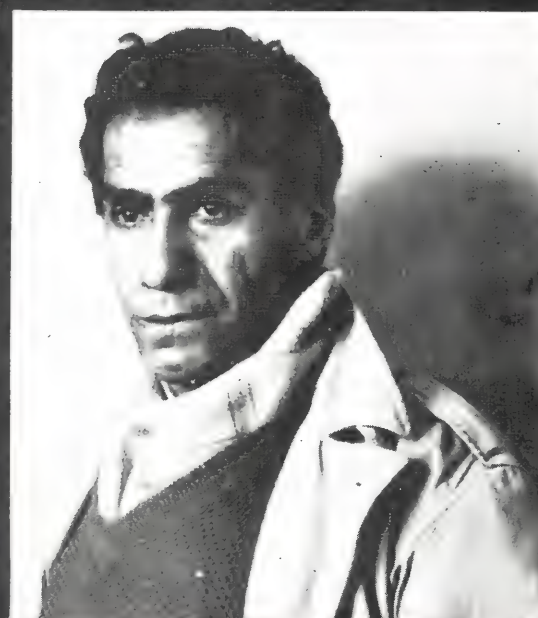


# Iraqi Artists

## *Fa'iq Hassan*

- Born 1914 in Baghdad.
- Graduated from the Beaux Arts in Paris (1938).
- Founded the Painting Department at the Baghdad Fine Arts Institute (1939).
- Founded the Societe Primitive (1950) and al-Zawiya Group (1967).

- Took part in exhibitions of the Art Friends Society in 1940s.
- One of four artists decorated during al-Wasiti Art Festival (1972).
- Holder of the "Chevalier des arts et lettres", French title (1985).
- Famous for depicting horses and desert scenes.



Fa'iq Hassan. *Bedouins*. Oil



# Iraqi Artists

## Jawad Salim

- Born 1921 in Ankara, Turkey.
- Studied art in Paris, Rome and London.
- Headed the Sculpture Department at the Baghdad Institute of Fine Arts until his death in 1961.
- Founder of the Baghdad Modern

Art Group (1951).

- His works are displayed in Iraq, Europe and the United States.

- Made use of Islamic and folkloric symbols, and incorporated arabesques and calligraphic decoration into his works.



Jawad Salim. *The Bride and Bridegroom*. Oil



# Iraqi Artists



## *Hafidh al-Duroubi*

- Born 1914 in Baghdad.
- Graduate of the Goldsmith College in London (1946).
- Founder of the Impressionists Group (1953).
- Member of the Art Friends Society.
- Awarded al-Wasiti prize.
- The earliest impressionist painter in Iraq.



Hafidh al-Duroubi *Fishermen*. Oil



# Iraqi Artists

## *Shakir Hassan Al Sa'id*

-Born 1925 in Samawa , southern Iraq.

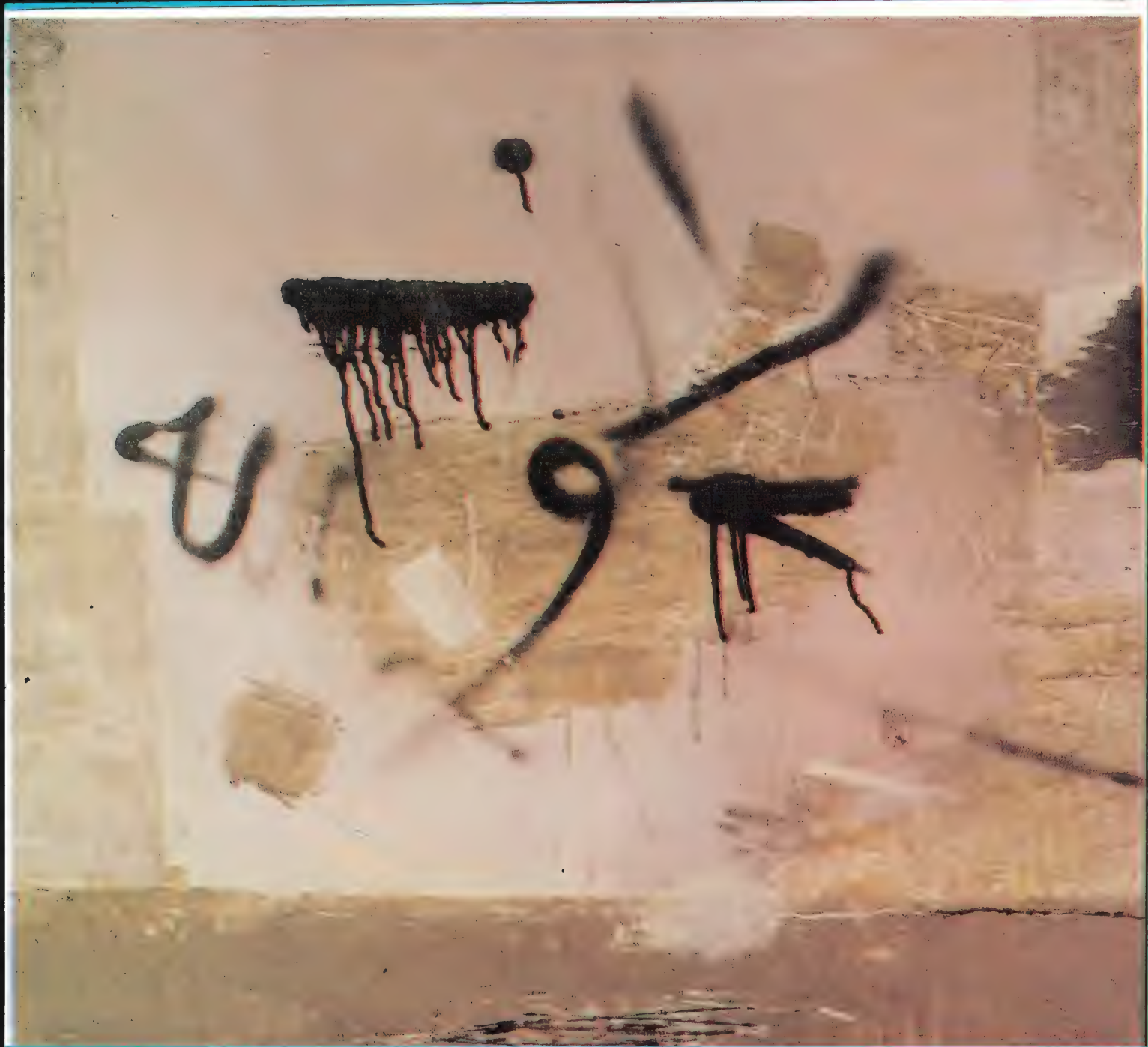
-Founded together with Jawad Salim the Baghdad Modern Art Group.

-Studied at the Beaux Arts in Paris.  
-Founded the One Dimension

Group (1970).

Awarded honorary prize at the Cagnes-sur-Mer International Exhibition in France (1975).

-Studied the Arabic alphabet in a philosophical way nearer to mysticism. His works show influence of Islamic and ancient Iraqi art.



Shakir Hassan Al Sa'id: *Writing on a Wall No.3*, Oil





Jawad Salim's *Monument of Liberty*

## *Tradition and Innovation in Modern Iraqi Art*

■ By Jabra I. Jabra

Until a few years ago it was possible to write about Iraqi art in more or less comprehensive terms as a phenomenon of some strange unexpected significance in a country that had begun to develop, together with its physical potential, its inner powers, its vision. However, as the country gained in economic growth in the last fifteen years or so, this phenomenon has assumed such dimensions that any but a detailed account would fall short of giving a true picture of its place in the intellectual life of Iraq. Anyone who saw the first Arab Biennale in Baghdad in 1974 realized this. Furthermore, Iraqi painting and sculpture seemed then by far the most powerful in the vast pan-Arab exhibition. They were as good, as vital, as any in the world. The second and third biennales, held respectively in Rabat, Morocco, in 1976 and in Benghazi, Libya, in 1979, confirmed this impression.

In the space of thirty years Iraqi art has thus come into its own as a thing of extinction. The art world may fly into all kinds of new directions, so many creations of the inventive mind may elicit surprise or wonder with their novelty, their technique, often seeming to anticipate the look of the next technological change, but there will always remain the painting itself, the canvas, the individual's personal relationship with his own creation, to which Iraqi art can be

favourably referred and compared. For a small country like Iraq, which has only just come out of centuries of stagnation, this is no small achievement.

It is interesting to note that the State's recognition of the artists, apart from providing art education and scholarships (which goes back to the thirties), was first accorded officially just about a quarter of a century ago when, in February 1956, the first comprehensive exhibition of Iraqi art was held at Al-Mansur Club in Baghdad under royal patronage. The exhibition was so successful that the artists got together soon later that year and launched the Iraqi Artists Society. When after the 1958 Revolution the Ministry of Information was established, it extended State patronage to artists and their exhibitions on a large scale. The Artists Society and the Ministry of Information, combining forces, made the exhibiting of almost any artists worth the name an easy affair that cost him or her next to nothing. Moreover, the Ministry, building up its permanent gallery of modern art, bought works from nearly every artist who held an exhibition.

### **Three Major Groups**

When in April 1951 the late Jawad Salim delivered a speech at the opening of the first exhibition of his group, the Baghdad



Modern Art Group, he said that a writer had called him and his fellow artists "the enemies of the people". He forgave him saying, however, that he did not expect more than three per cent of the public to react favourably to what the members of

his Group were trying to express although, he predicted, the public would soon be on the artists' side. His prediction was indeed justified: exhibitions came in rapid succession, the air buzzed with arguments about the artists' intent among the painters and sculptors themselves, among members of the public — mostly young intellectuals and university students — and in the newspapers. Fortunately, a number of artists were quite articulate, whether as speakers or writers: their case was put across in manifestoes, public meetings and lengthy, often heated, articles.

There were in the fifties three major groups, each led by a prominent painter, which embodied this struggle for the recognition of the artist and his view of the world: the S.P. (Societe Primitive), led by Fa'iq Hassan, the Baghdad Modern Art Group, led by Jawad Salim, and the Impressionists (made up largely of post-impressionists and cubists), led by Hafidh al-Duroubi. These groups have remained fairly active until recent years, comprising in all about fifty painters and sculptors. As more and more artists returned from their studies abroad (in London, Paris, Rome, Warsaw, Zagreb, even Peking), or graduated from Baghdad's own Fine Arts Institute and Fine Arts Academy (the latter being part of the Baghdad University), groups in the sixties tended to multiply or splinter off, with many artists, of course, preserving their independence. There were the Academicians, the Innovation-

ists, the New Vision Group, the One-Dimensionists and others. Each group prided itself on being revolutionary after its own fashion, ranging in its creed from the intensely political to the intensely religious or mystic. Actually the ideological lines, political or otherwise, often cut across the groups' formations in a remarkable way. What mattered in the final analysis was individual talent: the brilliant creators were of their own making. Each group contributed its valuable share to the general discussion and examination of ideas, just as it also made exhibitions easier to hold for the artists themselves.

### Roots and Tradition

One fact that has always to be recognised in understanding Arab art today is that however revolutionary Arab artists may be in concept and in aspiration, a spirit of tradition hangs on to them which they cannot, will not, shake off. However, much they may subscribe to the view of "internationalism" or "cosmopolitanism" in modern art, they will not give up the notion that their identity can only be shaped by rooting themselves in a tradition of their own, which helps to give a distinction to their work, marking them off as the creators and extenders of a national culture. Iraqi artists, most of whom have a very good knowledge of other nations' art history, have right from the start attempted to bring into existence a view of art which might be called Iraqi, or Arab. Hence their harking back to Sumerian and Assyrian sculpture, to Arab painting, manuscript illumination and calligraphy, to folk motifs found in handicrafts and handwoven rugs, and to local popular themes. Their achievement in style is the child of this wedding



Jawad Salim. *Street Musicians*. Oil





Shakir Hassan Al Sa'id. *Return to the Village.* Oil

of tradition to present-day contemporaneity. It is only thus that we may begin to understand the works of Jawad Salim, Shakir Hassan Al Sa'id, Kadhim Haider, Dhia al-Azzawi, Mohammed Ghani Hikmet, Khalid al-Rahal, Su'ad al-Attar, and many other leading artists. Whatever originality they may possess is thus connected, in one way or another, with the grass roots of their society, even though the connection may not always be readily visible.

Similarly, most Iraqi artists are deeply concerned with the dilemmas of twentieth century man and their own relevance to their times. They consider their work, basically, as part of the struggle of an Arab nation emerging as a new force in today's world. However personal the vision or the ultimate style, these are some of the major factors that make up their work.

### A Reckless Optimism

An interesting case is the work of Fa'iq Hassan, who remains, however much he shuns the limelight, the doyen of Iraqi painters.

For over forty years Fa'iq Hassan has been producing paintings of remarkable quality. When Iraq was yet, intellectually, outside the stream of the art movements of the West, Fa'iq Hassan, who had studied at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris in the mid-thirties, was doing his work driven almost by instinct, proving the high quality of his drawing and colouring.

His understanding, however, of the significance of colour and the importance of style as part of a trend in an epoch, came to him some time later through a few Polish painters who, themselves students of Pierre Bonnar, had an unexpected influence on three or four Iraqi artists during the war

years in Baghdad, when a large number of Poles came to Iraq as refugees. (Jawad Salim was another artist to be thus influenced, after he had spent a couple of years studying art in Paris and Rome). Hassan's work suddenly seemed to mature: it acquired that personal quality that marks a good artist.

Since then his painting has gone through a number of phases each, in a way, reminiscent of one of the successive trends that gained currency in Europe since the turn of the century: from impressionism to cubism, thence to abstract and then to expressionism, and finally to a form of realism. What is so remarkable in all these phases is the originality he has always shown in dealing with subjects that are intensely local, intensely Iraqi.

Together with his friend Jawad Salim, Fa'iq Hassan was for some time in search of a distinctive Iraqi style, which right from his beginnings he seemed to seek through emphasis on the "popular" essence of his subjects. His cubism in the fifties was a mixture of Arab forms largely derived from the 13th century Baghdadi illuminator Yahya al-Wasiti, and current European forms. But his peasants, his Bedouins, his fishermen— his constant themes— belonged very much to the waters of the Tigris and the Euphrates. His harvesters, his curd-sellers, however cubistically stylized, laboured under a clear Mesopotamian sun.

When after that he took a plunge into abstract painting, he found inspiration mostly in Iraqi folk arts. He would either balance his colour planes seemingly geometrically or so manipulate them as to suggest ancient Iraqi sites. But the



abstract could not satisfy Fa'iq Hassan for long; it was for him simply a step in the direction of expressionism, which turned out to be one of the richest periods of his career. He charged his paintings, which now became intense and sombre, with images of poverty and suffering, a strange mixture of compassion and horror, and succeeded in bringing up to the surface the hidden agonies of his people, with faces and figures often suggestive of nightmares.

### In Search of Style

Finally he abandoned all that for a style which we may loosely call realistic, on account of its content, though impressionistic would perhaps be a more accurate term.

Making good use of his rich technical skill. Fa'iq Hassan now concentrated on painting the local themes that obsessed him visually. The scenes amidst which he was born, amidst which he spent many years of his life, became the main source to feed his imagination. His pictures got filled with the back streets of Baghdad: with their age-old architecture, their haze, their sun and shade, their motion and their stillness, their primitive shops and their popular characters. He was intent on coming to closer grips with his direct visual experience of a scene he knew to be vanishing soon: it was a daily experience never so faithfully recorded by any other Iraqi artist.

Fascinated as he was by scenes of the city, where against the sense of old times having come to a standstill he also saw life bursting with freshness and vitality, he later became even more fascinated by scenes of country life. Into them he sketched ages of hard work and endurance such as had been the lot of the peasants for centuries. His paintings thus seem to reach down to the essence of his people's experience. With his recent passion for the portrayal of horses and riders, the horses turn into symbols of the Arab psyche. A kind of glittering, reckless optimism pervades, like the reflection in a falcon's eye in one of his riders' portraits. His Iraqi roots are all that matter to him: he celebrates life and celebrates man's endurance in it.

Having said all this, upon looking again into Fa'iq Hassan's achievement, one wonders whether the artist was not carried away by his subject a little too much. Having mastered the styles current in the world, he did not quite venture into experimentation with a style that might stem from his country's accumulated heritage. And yet he managed to create a corpus of work which at its best captures the Iraqi spirit of things to a unique degree, which has kept him in a leading position among Iraqi artists all along.

### A Major Influence

The only other artist who enjoyed similar popularity in his life-time was sculptor-painter Jawad Salim, who died in 1961 at the age of 41. By no means as prolific as his colleague Fa'iq Hassan, he excelled him by the intensity of his vision and by the avidity of his search for a style that would serve that vision, which earned him a place in the modern movement not only of leadership, but of inspiration. No single artist has had so much influence on art in Iraq, and influence that has in time overflowed Iraq's borders to the rest of the Arab world, largely through the work of the last ten years of his life—the painting and the sculpture which he based on endless

experimentation and developed through constant, untiring discussion, theorization and argument.

After studying for a couple of years in Paris and Rome, Jawad Salim worked in the war years at the Archaeological Museum in Baghdad, which gave him a thorough grounding in ancient Sumerian and Assyrian sculpture. He also taught at the Fine Arts Institute, sculpted and painted a lot, and for about six years kept a journal of a very personal nature which he filled with sketches, notes on art in several languages and self-analytical comments on his work and how he wanted it to develop. This very important journal came to light after his death (the present author edited and published excerpts from it). It revealed the profound, almost obsessive nature of his quest for an Iraqi mode of creation in the tradition and culture of his country; it foreshadowed and often explained what he endeavoured to achieve in later years.

Perhaps Jawad Salim, who later studied sculpture in the London Slade School from 1946 to 1949, was the first artist to make his contemporaries aware of the problem of style and tradition followed soon, with more systematic articulation, by his younger colleague Shakir Hassan Al Sa'id.

In spite of his immense knowledge of the history of painting and sculpture, Salim preserved an innocence, a freshness of vision, which made him draw creatively on local forms, symbols, habits, superstitions—all the folklore still active in the older alleys and coffee-shops of Baghdad and the surrounding countryside. But all this he skilfully related to the works of the past, from Sumer's diminutive sculptures, to Assyria's mighty marbles, from al-Wasiti's powerful illumina-



Fa'iq Hassan. Portrait of a Kurdish Man. Oil





Eric Haysan, *Celebration*, Oil



tions and calligraphy to the ancient figure-filled copperware of Baghdad and Mosul. And the whole thing, to be valid, had to be related to the modes and experience of our times. When he formed the Baghdad Modern Art Group in 1951, Salim had no idea that he was, in fact, providing a volatile movement, whose members were an amazing mixture of professionals and amateurs, with a direction not so rigid as inspiring.

### Monument of Liberty

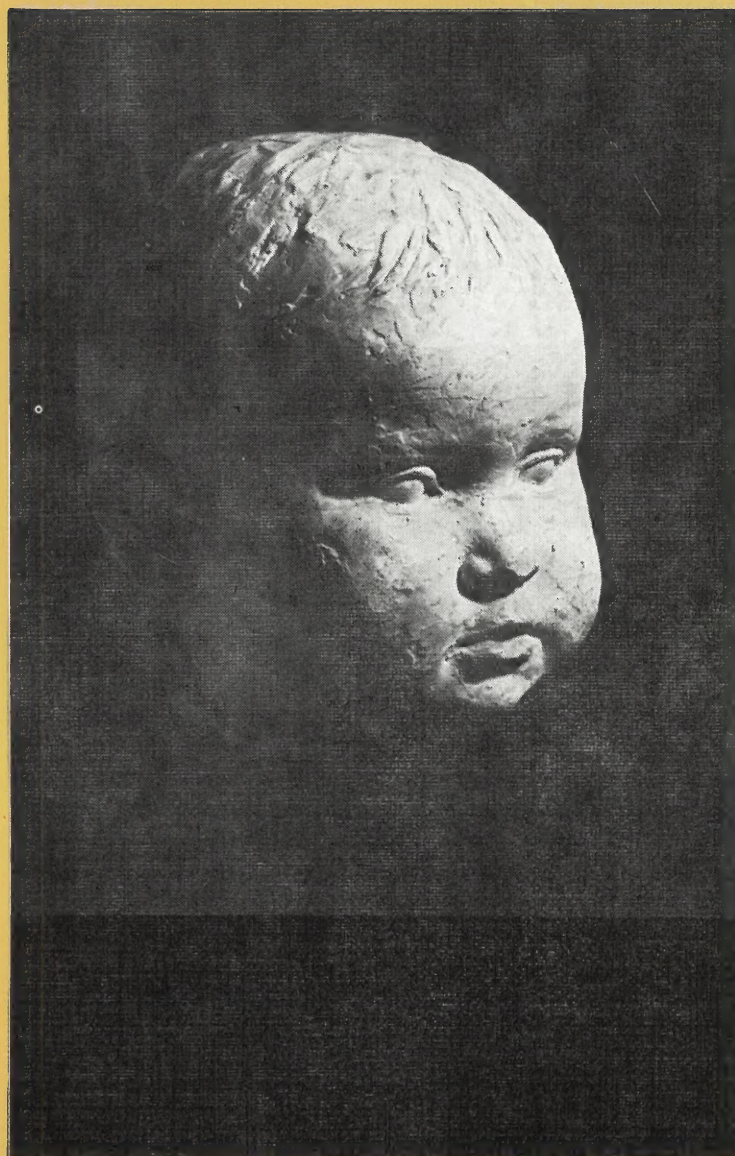
While his friend Fa'iq Hassan taught painting at the Fine Arts Institute, he taught sculpture, and between them they were responsible for the early discovery or development of many talents. Salim's work in the meantime came out in an interminable flow of drawings, paintings, sculpture, even book-covers and silver-ornaments. When with the 14th July 1958 Revolution Iraq was declared a republic, he was commissioned to make the *Monument of Liberty* in bronze. For an artist to have completed this enormous complex monument (which he cast in Florence) in less than eighteen months was indeed a spectacular achievement. Spread out in fourteen 8-metre high groups over a 50-metre long frieze, it stands in the heart of the capital, dominating Al-Tahrir Square. It embodies Jawad Salim's peculiar combination of power and lyricism, of the Iraqi and the Universal, together with a mystical tragic love for his country. In style, it is the final result of twenty years of study, experimentation and heart-searching. (For a full study of Jawad Salim, please consult the present author's book in Arabic: *Jawad Salim wa Nasb al-Hurriya*, (Jawad Salim and the Monument of Liberty) published by the Ministry of Information, Baghdad, 1974).

### From the Concrete to the Abstract

We see the progress of a similar spirit of search, theorization, and love in Shakir Hassan Al Sa'id's work. No Iraqi artist has written about art in general, and about the artist's reflections on his own work in particular, as much as Shakir Hassan Al-Sa'id, a younger friend and disciple of Jawad Salim's. He was one of the more active members of the Baghdad Group, supplementing his paintings and drawings with a great deal of written enunciation of the Group's main ideas which were often his own. His writings over the last twenty-five years have come to form a sort of a body of doctrine which though not easy to define, has had a considerable influence on the direction the Iraqi art movement has sometimes taken after Jawad Salim's death.

Basically, there has always been a religious vein in his work which has in the end assumed the proportions of a mystical vision. He started with the world as 'seen, and gradually developed towards a concept of the world as felt and as thought: it has been a slow agonized shift from the concrete to the abstract, but always with an emphasis on the local, the Arab, the popular

This has carried him through a succession of styles which first stemmed from folk-motifs, in form as well as in content. Having gone through a period of powerful expressionism in depicting the life of the poor in Iraq (his influences came from sources as wide apart as al-Wasiti, Paul Klee and modern Mexicans), and after six years in Paris, he first developed a traditional popular Arab style in iconography, especially common in Syria, into a native style of his own, incorporating child-like calligraphy with primitive drawing. Soon later,



Portrait of Zainab (the artist's daughter) by Jawad Salim. Plaster

accepting the old Moslem injunction against human representation, he abandoned any drawing that had the slightest figurative suggestion and devoted his entire attention to calligraphy.

It was not, of course, the highly stylized and rule-ridden calligraphy of Arab tradition, but a break-down of writing to its simplest, freest form of individual letters as such. The letter, for him, is not charged with possibilities of free form, but with mystical connections bordering on magic. The scribble on an old derelict wall, with hints of graffiti and the patina of time and oblivion, becomes a means of exciting a state of mind akin to an intense vision. He has called this kind of painting one-dimensionist, meaning by the "one dimension" that which connects man with God. The result has been works of originality and strange power. Also, a great influence on many artists, each of whom adapts the new letter-trend to his own technique and style.

From *The Grass Roots of Iraqi Art*, published by Wasit Graphic and Publishing, Baghdad





Shadi Hassan Al-Saidi, *The Penan*, Oil



